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# *The Works of*
# *LEONARD MERRICK*

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**WHILE PARIS LAUGHED.** Being Pranks and Passions of the Poet Tricotrin.

**CONRAD IN QUEST OF HIS YOUTH.** With an Introduction by SIR J. M. BARRIE.

**WHEN LOVE FLIES OUT O' THE WINDOW.** With an Introduction by SIR WILLIAM ROBERTSON NICOLL.

**THE POSITION OF PEGGY HARPER.** With an Introduction by SIR ARTHUR PINERO.

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**A CHAIR ON THE BOULEVARD.** With an Introduction by A. NEIL LYONS.

**THE HOUSE OF LYNCH.** With an Introduction by G. K. CHESTERTON.

HODDER & STOUGHTON, LIMITED, LONDON.

# A CHAIR ON THE BOULEVARD

BY LEONARD MERRICK

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
A. NEIL LYONS

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# INTRODUCTION

These disjointed thoughts about one of Leonard Merrick's most articulate books must begin with a personal confession.

For many years I walked about this earth avoiding the works of Leonard Merrick, as other men might have avoided an onion. This insane aversion was created in my mind chiefly by admirers of what is called the "cheerful" note in fiction. Such people are completely agreed in pronouncing Mr. Merrick to be a pessimistic writer. I hate pessimistic writers.

Years ago, when I was of an age when the mind responds acutely to exterior impressions, some well-meaning uncle, or other fool, gave me a pessimistic book to read. This was a work of fiction which the British Public had hailed as a masterpiece of humour. It represented, with an utter fury of pessimism, the spiritual inadequacies of—but why go into details?

Now I have to confess that for a long time I did Mr. Merrick the extraordinary injustice of believing him to be the author of that popular masterpiece.

The mistake, though intellectually unpardonable, may perhaps be condoned on other grounds. By virtue of that process of thought which we call the "association of ideas," I naturally connected Mr. Merrick with this work of super-pessimism; my friends being so confirmed in their belief that he was a super-pessimist.

But, by virtue of a fortunate accident, I at last got the truth about Mr. Merrick. This event arose from the action of a right-minded butcher, who, having exhausted his stock of *The Pigeon-Fancier's Gazette*, sent me my weekly supply of dog-bones wrapped about with Leonard Merrick.

These dog-bones happened to reach my house at a moment when no other kind of literary nutriment was to be had. Having nothing better to read, I read the dog-bone wrappers. Thus, by dog-bones, was I brought to Merrick: the most jolly, amusing, and optimistic of all spiritual friends.

The book to which these utterances are prefixed is to my mind one of the few *really* amusing books which have been published in England during my lifetime. But, then, I think that all of Mr. Merrick's books are amusing: even his "earnest" books, such as *The Actor-Manager*, *When Love Flies out o' the Window*, or *The Position of Peggy Harper*.

It is, of course, true that such novels as these are unlikely to be found congenial by those persons who derive entertainment from fiction like my uncle's present. On the other hand, there are people in the world with a capacity for being amused by psychological inquiry. To such people I would say: "Don't miss Merrick." The extraordinary cheerfulness of Mr. Merrick's philosophy is a fact which will impress itself upon all folk who are able to take a really cheerful view of life.

All of Mr. Merrick's sermons—I do not hesitate to call his novels "sermons," because no decent novel can be anything else—all his sermons, I say, point to this conclusion: that people who go out deliberately to look for happiness, to kick for it, and fight for it, or who try to buy it with money, will miss happiness; this being a state of heart—a mere outgrowth, more often to be found by a careless and self-forgetful vagrant than by the deliberate and self-conscious seeker. A cheerful doctrine this. Not only cheerful, but self-evidently true. How right it is, and how cheerful it is, to think that while philosophers and clergymen strut about this world looking out, and smelling out, for its prime experiences, more careless and less celebrated men are continually finding such things, without effort, without care, in irregular and unconsecrated places.

In novel after novel, Mr. Merrick has preached the same good-humoured, cheerful doctrine: the doctrine of anti-fat. He asks us to believe—he *makes* us believe—that a man (or woman) is not merely virtuous, but merely sane, who exchanges the fats of fulfilment for the little lean pleasures of honourable hope and high endeavour. Oh wise, oh witty Mr. Merrick!

Mr. Merrick has not, to my knowledge, written one novel in which his hero is represented as having achieved complacency. Mr. Merrick's heroes all undergo the very human experience of "hitting a snag." They are none of them represented as *enjoying* this experience; but none of them whimper and none of them "rat."

If anybody could prove to me that Mr. Merrick had ever invented a hero who submitted tamely to tame success, to fat prosperity; or who had stepped, were it ever so lightly, into the dirty morass of accepted comfort, then would I cheerfully admit to anybody that Leonard Merrick is a Pessimistic Writer. But until this proof be forthcoming, I stick to my opinion: I stick to the conviction that Mr. Merrick is the gayest, cheerfullest, and most courageous of living humorists.

This opinion is a general opinion, applicable to Mr. Merrick's general work. This morning, however, I am asked to narrow my field of view: to contemplate not so much Mr. Merrick at large as Mr. Merrick in particular: to look at Mr.

Merrick in his relationship to this one particular book: *A Chair on the Boulevard.*

Now, if I say, as I have said, that Mr. Merrick is cheerful in his capacity of solemn novelist, what am I to say of Mr. Merrick in his lighter aspect, that of a writer of *feuilletons?* Addressing myself to an imaginary audience of Magazine Enthusiasts, I ask them to tell me whether, judged even by comparison with their favourite fiction, some of the stories to be found in this volume are not exquisitely amusing?

The first story in the book—that which Mr. Merrick calls "The Tragedy of a Comic Song"—is in my view the funniest story of this century: but I don't ask or expect the Magazine Enthusiast to share this view or to endorse that judgment. "The Tragedy of a Comic Song" is essentially one of those productions in which the reader is expected to collaborate. The author has deliberately contrived certain voids of narrative; and his reader is expected to populate these anecdotal wastes. This is asking more than it is fair to ask of a Magazine Enthusiast. No genuine Magazine reader cares for the elusive or allusive style in fiction. "The Tragedy of a Comic Song" won't do for Bouverie Street, however well and completely it may do for me.

But there are other stories in this book. There is that screaming farce called "The Suicides in the Rue Sombre." Now, then, you Magazine zealots, speak up and tell me truly: is there anything too difficult for you in this? If so, the psychology of what is called "public taste" becomes a subject not suited to public discussion.

The foregoing remarks and considerations apply equally to such stories as "The Dress Clothes of M. Pomponnet" and "Tricotrin Entertains." There are other stories which delight me, as, for example, "Little-Flower-of-the-Wood": but this jerks us back again to the essential Mr. Merrick: he who demands collaboration.

There are, again, other stories, and yet others; but to write down all their titles here would be merely to transcribe the index page of the book. Neither the reader nor I can afford to waste our time like that.

I have said nothing about the technical qualities of Mr. Merrick's work. I don't intend to do so. It has long been a conceit of mine to believe that professional vendors of letterpress should reserve their mutual discussions of technique for technical occasions, such as those when men of like mind and occupation sit at table, with a bottle between them.

I am convinced that Mr. Merrick is a very great and gifted man, deeply skilled in his profession. I can bring forth arguments and proofs to support this conviction; but I fail utterly to see why I should do so. To people who have a sense of that which is sincere and fresh in fiction, these facts will be apparent. To them my arguments and illustrations would be profitless. As for those honest persons to whom the excellencies of Merrick are not apparent, I can only think that nothing which I or any other man could say would render them obvious. "Happiness is in ourselves," as the Vicar remarked to the donkey who was pulling the lawn-mower.

Good luck, Leonard Merrick, and good cheer! I shout my greeting to you across the ripples of that inky lake which is our common fishery.

A. Neil Lyons.

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# THE TRAGEDY OF A COMIC SONG

I LIKE to monopolise a table in a restaurant, unless a friend is with me, so I resented the young man's presence. Besides, he had a melancholy face. If it hadn't been for the piano-organ, I don't suppose I should have spoken to him. As the organ that was afflicting Lisle Street began to volley a comic song of a day that was dead, he started.

"That tune!" he murmured in French. If I did not deceive myself, tears sprang to his eyes.

I was curious. Certainly, on both sides of the Channel, we had long ago had more than enough of the tune—no self-respecting organ-grinder rattled it now. That the young Frenchman should wince at the tune I understood. But that he should weep!

I smiled sympathetically. "We suffered from it over here as well," I remarked.

"I did not know," he said, in English that reproved my French, "it was sung in London also—'Partant pour le Moulin'?"

" Under another name," I told him, " it was an epidemic."

Clearly, the organ had stirred distressing memories in him, for though we fell to chatting, I could see that he neither talked nor dined with any relish. As luck would have it, too, the instrument of torture resumed its répertoire well within hearing, and when " Partant pour le Moulin " was reached again, he clasped his head.

" You find it so painful ? " I inquired.

" Painful ? " he exclaimed. " Monsieur, it is my 'istory, that comic tune ! It is to me romance, tragedy, ruin. Will you hear ? Wait ! I shall range my ideas. Listen :

It is Paris, at Montmartre—we are before the door of a laundress. A girl approaches. Her gaze is troubled, she frowns a little. What ails her ? I shall tell you : the laundress has refused to deliver her washing until her bill is paid. And the girl cannot pay it—not till Saturday—and she has need of things to put on. It is a moment of anxiety.

She opens the door. Some minutes pass. The girl reappears, holding under her arm a little parcel. Good ! she has triumphed. In coming out she sees a young man, pale, abstracted, who stands before the shop. He does not attempt to enter. He stands motionless, regarding the window with an air forlorn.

"Ah," she says to herself, "here is another customer who cannot pay his bill!"

But wait a little. After 'alf an hour what happens? She sees the young man again! This time he stands before a modest restaurant. Does he go in? No, again no! He regards the window sorrowfully. He sighs. The dejection of his attitude would melt a stone.

"Poor boy," she thought; "he cannot pay for a dinner either!"

The affair is not finished. How the summer day is beautiful—she will do some footing! Figure yourself that once more she perceives the young man. Now it is before the mont-de-piété, the pawnbroker's. She watches him attentively. Here, at least, he will enter, she does not doubt. She is wrong. It is the same thing—he regards, he laments, he turns away!

"Oh, mon Dieu," she said. "Nothing remains to him to pawn even!"

It is too strong! She addressed him:

"Monsieur!"

But, when she has said "Monsieur," there is the question how she shall continue. Now the young man regards the girl instead of the pawnbroker's. Her features are pretty—or "pretty well"; her costume has been made by herself, but it is not bad; and she has chic—above all she has chic. He asks:

"What can I have the pleasure to do for you?"

Remark that she is bohemian, and he also. The conversation was like this:

"Monsieur, three times this morning I have seen you. It was impossible that I resist speaking. You have grief?"

"Frightful!" he said.

"Perhaps," she added timidly, "you have hunger also?"

"A hunger insupportable, mademoiselle!"

"I myself am extremely hard up, monsieur, but will you permit that I offer you what I can?"

"Angel!" the young man exclaimed. "There must be wings under your coat. But I beg of you not to fly yet. I shall tell you the reason of my grief. If you will do me the honour to seat yourself at the café opposite, we shall be able to talk more pleasantly."

This appeared strange enough, this invitation from a young man who she had supposed was starving; but wait a little! Her amazement increased when, to pay for the wine he had ordered, her companion threw on to the table a bank-note with a gesture absolutely careless.

She was in danger of distrusting her eyes.

"Is it a dream?" she cried. "Is it a vision from the *Thousand and One Nights*, or is it really a bank-note?"

"Mademoiselle, it is the mess of pottage," the young man answered gloomily. "It is the cause of my sadness: for that miserable money, and more that is to come, I have sold my birthright."

She was on a ship—no, what is it, your expression?—"at sea"!

"I am a poet," he explained; "but perhaps you may not know my work; I am not celebrated. I am Tricotrin, mademoiselle—Gustave Tricotrin, at your feet! For years I have written, aided by ambition, and an uncle who manufactures silk in Lyons. Well, the time is arrived when he is monstrous, this uncle. He says to me, 'Gustave, this cannot last—you make no living, you make nothing but debts. (My tragedies he ignores.) Either you must be a poet who makes money, or you must be a partner who makes silk.' How could I defy him?—he holds the purse. It was unavoidable that I stooped. He has given me a sum to satisfy my creditors, and Monday I depart for Lyons. In the meantime, I take tender farewells of the familiar scenes I shall perhaps never behold again."

"How I have been mistaken!" she exclaimed. And then: "But the hunger you confessed?"

"Of the soul, mademoiselle," said the poet—"the most bitter!"

"And you have no difficulties with the laundress?"

"None," he groaned. "But in the bright days of poverty that have fled for ever, I have had many difficulties with her. This morning

I reconstituted the situation—I imagined myself without a sou, and without a collar."

"The little restaurant," she questioned, "where I saw you dining on the odour?"

"I figured fondly to myself that I was ravenous and that I dared not enter. It was sublime."

"The mont-de-piété?"

"There imagination restored to me the vanished moments when I have mounted with suspense, and my least deplorable suit of clothes." His emotion was profound. "It is my youth to which I am bidding adieu!" he cried. "It is more than that—it is my aspirations and my renown!"

"But you have said that you have no renown," she reminded him.

"So much the more painful," said the young man; "the hussy we could not win is always the fairest—I part from renown even more despairingly than from youth."

She felt an amusement, an interest. But soon it was the turn of him to feel an interest—the interest that had consequences so important, so 'eart-breaking, so *fatales!* He had demanded of her, most naturally, her history, and this she related to him in a style dramatic. Myself, I have not the style dramatic, though I avow to you I admire that.

"We are in a provincial town," she said to the young man, "we are in Rouen—the workroom of a modiste. Have no embarrassment, monsieur Tricotrin, you, at least, are invisible to the girls who sew! They sew all day and talk little—already they are *tristes*, resigned. Among them sits one who is different—one passionate, ambitious—a girl who burns to be *divette*, singer, who is devoured by longings for applause, fashion, wealth. She has made the acquaintance of a little pastrycook. He has become fascinated, they are affianced. In a month she will be married."

The young man, Tricotrin, well understood that the girl she described was herself.

"What does she consider while she sits sewing?" she continued. "That the pastrycook loves her, that he is generous, that she will do her most to be to him a good wife? Not at all. Far from that! She considers, on the contrary, that she was a fool to promise him; she considers how she shall escape—from him, from Rouen, from her ennui—she seeks to fly to Paris. Alas! she has no money, not a franc. And she sews—always she sews in the dull room—and her spirit rebels."

"Good!" said the poet. "It is a capital first instalment."

"The time goes on. There remains only a week to the marriage morning. The little home is prepared, the little pastrycook is full of joy. *Alors*, one evening they go out; for her the sole attraction in the town is the hall of varieties. Yes, it is third class, it is not great things; however, it is the only one in Rouen. He purchases two tickets. What a misfortune—it is the last temptation to her! They stroll back; she takes his arm—under the moon, under the stars; but she sees only the lamps of Paris—she sees only that he can say nothing she cares to hear!"

"Ah, unhappy man!" murmured the poet.

"They sit at a café table, and he talks, the fiancé, of the bliss that is to come to them. She attends to not a word, not a syllable. While she smiles, she questions herself, frenzied, how she can escape. She has commanded a *sirop.* As she lifts her glass to the syphon, her gaze falls on the ring she wears—the ring of their betrothal. 'To the future, cher ange!' says the fiancé. 'To the future, vieux chéri!' she says. And she laughs in her heart—for she resolves to sell the ring!"

Tricotrin had become absolutely enthralled.

"She obtained for the ring forty-five francs the next day—and for the little pastrycook all is finished. She wrote him a letter—'Good-bye.' He has lost his reason. Mad with despair, he has flung himself before an electric car, and is killed. . . . It is strange," she added to the poet, who regarded her with consternation, "that I did not think sooner of the ring that was always on my finger, n'est-ce-pas? It may be that never before had I felt so furious an impulse to desert him. It may be also—that there was no ring and no pastrycook!" And she broke into peals of laughter.

"Ah, mon Dieu," exclaimed the young man, "but you are enchanting! Let us go to breakfast—you are the kindred soul I have looked for all my life. By-the-bye, I may as well know your name?"

Then, monsieur, this poor girl who had trembled before her laundress, she told him a name which was going, in a while, to crowd the Ambassadeurs and be famous through all Paris—a name which was to mean caprices, folly, extravagance the most wilful and reckless. She answered—and it said nothing yet—"My name is Paulette Fleury."

The piano-organ stopped short, as if it knew the Frenchman had reached a crisis in his narrative. He folded his arms and nodded impressively.

"Voilà! Monsieur, I 'ave introduced you to Paulette Fleury! It was her beginning."

He offered me a cigarette, and frowned, lost in thought, at the lady who was chopping bread behind the counter.

"Listen," he resumed:

They have breakfasted; they have fed the sparrows around their chairs, and they have strolled under the green trees in the sunshine. She was singing then at a little café-concert the most obscure. It is arranged, before they part, that in the evening he shall go to applaud her.

He had a friend, young also, a composer, named Nicolas Pitou. I cannot express to you the devotion that existed between them. Pitou was employed at a publisher's, but the publisher paid him not much better than his art. The comrades have shared everything: the loans from the mont-de-piété, the attic, and the dreams. In Montmartre it was said "Tricotrin and Pitou" as one says "Orestes and Pylades." It is beautiful such affection, hein? Listen!

Tricotrin has recounted to his friend his meeting with Paulette, and when the hour for the concert is arrived, Pitou accompanied him. The musician, however, was, perhaps, the more sedate. He has gone with little expectation; his interest was not high.

What a surprise he has had! He has found her an actress—an artist to the ends of the fingers. Tricotrin was astonished also. The two friends, the poet and composer, said "Mon Dieu!" They regarded the one the other. They said "Mon Dieu!" again. Soon Pitou has requested of Tricotrin an introduction. It is agreed. Tricotrin has presented his friend, and invited the *chanteuse* to drink a bock—a glass of beer. . . .

A propos, you take a liqueur, monsieur, yes? What liqueur you take? Sst, garçon! . . . Well, you conjecture, no doubt, what I shall say? Before the bock was finished, they were in love with her—both!

At the door of her lodging, Paulette has given to each a pressure of the hand, and said gently, "Till to-morrow."

"I worship her!" Tricotrin told Pitou.

"I have found my Ideal!" Pitou answered Tricotrin.

It is superb, such friendship, hein?

In the mind of the poet who had accomplished tragedies majestic—in the mind of the composer, the most classical in Montmartre—there had been born a new ambition: it was to write a comic song for Paulette Fleury!

It appears to you droll, perhaps? Monsieur, to her lover, the humblest *divette* is more than Patti. In all the world there can be no joy so thrilling as to hear the music of one's brain sung by the woman one adores—unless it be to hear the woman one adores give forth one's verse. I believe it has been accepted as a fact, this; nevertheless it is true.

Yes, already the idea had come to them, and Paulette was well pleased when they told her of it. Oh, she knew they loved her, both, and with both she coquetted. But with their intention she did not coquet; as to that she was in earnest.

Every day they discussed it with enthusiasm—they were to write a song that should make for her a furore.

What happened? I shall tell you. Monday, when Tricotrin was to depart for Lyons, he informed his uncle that he will not go. No less than that! His uncle was furious—I do not blame him—but naturally Tricotrin has argued, "If I am to create for Paulette her great chance, I must remain in Paris to study Paulette! I cannot create in an atmosphere of commerce. I require the Montmartrois, the boulevards, the inspiration of her presence." Isn't it?

And Pitou—whose very soul had been enraptured in his leisure by a fugue he was composing—Pitou would have no more of it. He allowed the fugue to grow dusty, while day and night he thought always of refrains that ran "*Zim-la-zim-la zim-boum-boum!*" Constantly they conferred, the comrades. They told the one the other how they loved her; and then they beat their heads, and besought of Providence a fine idea for the comic song.

It was their thought supreme. The silk manufacturer has washed his 'ands of Tricotrin, but he has not cared—there remained to him still one of the bank-notes. As for Pitou, who neglected everything except to find his melody for Paulette, the publisher has given him the sack. Their acquaintances ridiculed the sacrifices made for her. But, monsieur, when a man loves truly, to make a sacrifice for the woman is to make a present to himself.

Nevertheless, I avow to you that they fretted because of her coquetry. One hour it seemed that Pitou had gained her heart; the next her encouragement has been all to Tricotrin. Sometimes they have said to her:

"Paulette, it is true we are as Orestes and Pylades, but there can be only one King of Eden at the time. Is it Orestes, or Pylades that you mean to crown?"

Then she would laugh and reply:

"How can I say? I like you both so much I can never make up my mind which to like best."

It was not satisfactory.

And always she added, "In the meantime, where is the song?"

Ah, the song, that song, how they have sought it!—on the Butte, and in the Bois, and round the Halles. Often they have tramped Paris till daybreak, meditating the great chance for Paulette. And at last the poet has discovered it: for each verse a different phase of life, but through it all, the pursuit of gaiety, the fever of the dance—the gaiety of youth, the gaiety of dotage, the gaiety of despair! It should be the song of the pleasure-seekers—the voices of Paris when the lamps are lit.

Monsieur, if we sat 'ere in the restaurant until it closed I could not describe to you how passionately Tricotrin, the devoted Tricotrin, worked for her. He has studied her without cease; he has studied her attitudes, her expressions. He has taken his lyric as if it were material and cut it to her figure; he has taken it as if it were plaster, and moulded it upon her mannerisms. There was not a *moue* that she made, not a pretty trick that she had, not a word that she liked to sing for which he did not provide an opportunity. At the last line, when the pen fell from his fingers, he shouted to Pitou, "Comrade, be brave—I have won her!"

And Pitou? Monsieur, if we sat 'ere till they prepared the tables for déjeuner to-morrow, I could not describe to you how passionately Pitou, the devoted Pitou, worked that she might have a grand popularity by his music. At dawn, when he has found that *strepitoso* passage, which is the hurrying of the feet, he wakened the poet and cried, "Mon ami, I pity you—she is mine!" It was the souls of two men when it was finished, that comic song they made for her! It was the song the organ has ground out—"Partant pour le Moulin."

And then they rehearsed it, the three of them, over and over, inventing always new effects. And then the night for the song is arrived. It has rained all day, and they have walked together in the rain—the singer, and the men who loved her, both—to the little café-concert where she would appear.

They tremble in the room, among the crowd, Pitou and Tricotrin; they are agitated. There are others who sing—it says nothing to them. In the room, in the Future, there is only Paulette!

It is very hot in the café-concert, and there is too much noise. At last they ask her: "Is she nervous?" She shakes her head: "Mais non!" She smiles to them.

Attend! It is her turn. Ouf; but it is hot in the café-concert, and there is too much noise! She mounts the platform. The audience are careless; it continues, the jingle of the glasses, the hum of talk. She begins. Beneath the table Tricotrin has gripped the hand of Pitou.

Wait! Regard the crowd that look at her! The glasses are silent, now, hein? The talk has stopped. To a great actress is come her chance. There is *not* too much noise in the café-concert!

But, when she finished! What an uproar! Never will she forget it. A thousand times she has told the story, how it was written—the song—and how it made her famous. Before two weeks she was the attraction of the Ambassadeurs, and all Paris has raved of Paulette Fleury.

Tricotrin and Pitou were mad with joy. Certainly Paris did not rave of Pitou or Tricotrin—there have not been many that remembered who wrote the song; and it earned no money for them, either, because it was hers—the gift of their love. Still, they were enraptured. To both of them she owed equally, and more than ever it was a question which would be the happy man.

Listen! When they are gone to call on her one afternoon she was not at 'ome. What had happened? I shall tell you. There was a noodle, rich—what you call a "Johnnie in the Stalls"—who became infatuated with her at the Ambassadeurs. He whistled "Partant pour le Moulin" all the days, and went to hear it all the nights. Well, she was not at 'ome because she had married him. Absolutely they were married! Her lovers have been told it at the door.

What a moment! Figure yourself what they have suffered, both! They had worshipped her, they had made sacrifices for her, they had created for her her grand success; and, as a consequence of that song, she was the wife of the "Johnnie in the Stalls"!

Far down the street, but yet distinct, the organ revived the tune again. My Frenchman shuddered, and got up.

"I cannot support it," he murmured. "You understand? The associations are too pathetic."

"They must be harrowing," I said. "Before you go, there is one thing I should like to ask you, if I may. Have I had the honour of meeting monsieur Tricotrin, or monsieur Pitou?"

He stroked his hat, and gazed at me in sad surprise. "Ah, but neither, monsieur," he groaned. "The associations are much more 'arrowing than that—I was the 'Johnnie in the Stalls'!"

# TRICOTRIN ENTERTAINS

One night when Pitou went home, an unaccustomed perfume floated to meet him on the stairs. He climbed them in amazement.

"If we lived in an age of miracles I should conclude that Tricotrin was smoking a cigar," he said to himself. "What can it be?"

The pair occupied a garret in the rue des Trois Frères at this time, where their window, in sore need of repairs, commanded an unrivalled view of the dirty steps descending to the passage des Abbesses. To-night, behold Tricotrin pacing the garret with dignity, between his lips an Havannah that could have cost no less than a franc. The composer rubbed his eyes.

"Have they made you an Academician?" he stammered. "Or has your uncle, the silk manufacturer, died and left you his business?"

"My friend," replied the poet, "prepare yourself forthwith for 'a New and Powerful Serial of the Most Absorbing Interest'! I am no longer the young man who went out this evening—I am a celebrity."

"I thought," said the composer, "that it couldn't be you when I saw the cigar."

"Figure yourself," continued Tricotrin, "that at nine o'clock I was wandering on the Grand Boulevard with a thirst that could have consumed a brewery. I might mention that I had also empty pockets, but——"

"It would be to pad the powerful Serial shamelessly," said Pitou: "there are things that one takes for granted."

"At the corner of the place de l'Opéra a fellow passed me whom I knew and yet did not know; I could not recall where it was we had met. I turned and followed him, racking my brains the while. Suddenly I remembered——"

"Pardon me," interrupted the composer, "but I have read *Bel-Ami* myself. Oh, it is quite evident that you are a celebrity—you have already forgotten how to be original!"

"There is a resemblance, it is true," admitted Tricotrin. "However, Maupassant had no copyright in the place de l'Opéra. I say that I remembered the man; I had known him when he was in the advertisement business in Lyons. Well, we have supped together; he is in a position to do me a service—he will ask an editor to publish an Interview with me!"

"An Interview?" exclaimed Pitou. "You are to be Interviewed? Ah, no, my poor friend, too much meat has unhinged your reason! Go to sleep—you will be hungry and sane again to-morrow."

"It will startle some of them, hein? 'Gustave Tricotrin at Home'—in the illustrated edition of *Le Demi-Mot?*"

"Illustrated?" gasped Pitou. He looked round the attic. "Did I understand you to say 'illustrated'?"

"Well, well," said Tricotrin, "we shall move the beds! And, when the concierge nods, perhaps we can borrow the palm from the portals. With a palm and an amiable photographer, an air of splendour is easily arrived at. I should like a screen—we will raise one from a studio in the rue Ravignan. Mon Dieu! with a palm and a screen I foresee the most opulent effects. 'A Corner of the Study'—we can put the screen in front of the washhand-stand, and litter the table with manuscripts—you will admit that we have a sufficiency of manuscripts?—no one will know that they have all been rejected. Also, a painter in the rue Ravignan might lend us a few of his failures—'Before you go, let me show you my pictures,' said monsieur Tricotrin: 'I am an ardent collector'!"

In Montmartre the sight of two "types" shifting household gods makes no sensation—the sails of the remaining windmills still revolve. On the day that it had its likeness taken, the attic was temporarily transformed. At least a score of unappreciated masterpieces concealed the dilapidation of the walls; the broken window was decorated with an Eastern fabric that had been a cherished " property " of half the ateliers in Paris; the poet himself—with the palm drooping gracefully above his head—mused in a massive chair, in which Solomon had been pronouncing judgment until 12.15, when the poet had called for it. The appearance of exhaustion observed by admirers of the poet's portrait was due to the chair's appalling weight. As he staggered under it up the steps of the passage des Abbesses, the young man had feared he would expire on the threshold of his fame.

However, the photographer proved as resourceful as could be desired, and perhaps the most striking feature of the illustration was the spaciousness of the apartment in which monsieur Tricotrin was presented to readers of *Le Demi-Mot*. The name of the thoroughfare was not obtruded.

With what pride was that issue of the journal regarded in the rue des Trois Frères !

" Aha ! " cried Tricotrin, who in moments persuaded himself that he really occupied such noble quarters, " those who repudiated me in the days of my struggles will be a little repentant now, hein ? Stone Heart will discover that I was not wrong in relying on my genius ! "

" I assume," said Pitou, " that ' Stone Heart ' is your newest pet-name for the silk-manufacturing uncle ? "

"You catch my meaning precisely. I propose to send a copy of the paper to Lyons, with the Interview artistically bordered by laurels; I cannot draw laurels myself, but there are plenty of persons who can. We will find someone to do it when we palter with starvation at the Café du Bel Avenir this evening—or perhaps we had better fast at the Lucullus Junior, instead; there is occasionally some ink in the bottle there. I shall put the address in the margin—my uncle will not know where it is, and on the grounds of euphony I have no fault to find with it. It would not surprise me if I received an affectionate letter and a bank-note in reply—the perversity of human nature delights in generosities to the prosperous."

"It is a fact," said Pitou. "That human nature!"

"Who knows?—he may even renew the allowance that he used to make me!"

"Upon my word, more unlikely things have happened," Pitou conceded.

"Mon Dieu, Nicolas, we shall again have enough to eat!"

"Ah, visionary!" exclaimed Pitou; "are there no bounds to your imagination?"

Now, the perversity to which the poet referred did inspire monsieur Rigaud, of Lyons, to loosen his purse-strings. He wrote that he rejoiced to learn that Gustave was beginning to make his way, and enclosed a present of two hundred and fifty francs. More, after an avuncular preamble which the poet skipped—having a literary hatred of digression in the works of others—he even hinted that the allowance might be resumed.

What a banquet there was in bohemia! How the glasses jingled afterwards in La Lune Rousse, and oh, the beautiful hats that Germaine and Marcelle displayed on the next fine Sunday! Even when the last ripples of the splash were stilled, the comrades swaggered gallantly on the boulevard Rochechouart, for by any post might not the first instalment of that allowance arrive?

Weeks passed; and Tricotrin began to say, "It looks to me as if we needed another Interview!"

And then came a letter which was no less cordial than its predecessor, but which stunned the unfortunate recipient like a warrant for his execution. Monsieur Rigaud stated that business would bring him to Paris on the following evening and that he anticipated the pleasure of visiting his nephew; he trusted that his dear Gustave would meet him at the station. The poet and composer stared at each other with bloodless faces.

"You must call at his hotel instead," faltered Pitou at last.

" But you may be sure he will wish to see my elegant abode."

" ' It is in the hands of the decorators. How unfortunate ! ' "

" He would propose to offer them suggestions; he is a born suggester."

" ' Fever is raging in the house—a most infectious fever ' ; we will ask a medical student to give us one."

" It would not explain my lodging in a slum meanwhile."

" Well, let us admit that there is nothing to be done; you will have to own up ! "

" Are you insane ? It is improvident youths like you who come to lament their wasted lives. If I could receive him this once as he expects to be received, we cannot doubt that it would mean an income of two thousand francs to me. Prosperity dangles before us—shall I fail to clutch it ? Mon Dieu, what a catastrophe, his coming to Paris ! Why cannot he conduct his business in Lyons ? Is there not enough money in the city of Lyons to satisfy him ? O grasper ! what greed ! Nicolas, my more than brother, if it were night when I took him to a sumptuous apartment, he might not notice the name of the street—I could talk brilliantly as we turned the corner. Also I could scintillate as I led him away. He would never know that it was not the rue des Trois Frères."

" You are right," agreed Pitou; " but which is the pauper in our social circle whose sumptuous apartment you propose to acquire ? "

" One must consider," said Tricotrin. " Obviously, I am compelled to entertain in somebody's; fortunately, I have two days to find it in. I shall now go forth ! "

It was a genial morning, and the first person he accosted in the rue Ravignan was Goujaud, painting in the patch of garden before the studios. " Tell me, Goujaud," exclaimed the poet, " have you any gilded acquaintance who would permit me the use of his apartment for two hours to-morrow evening ? "

Goujaud reflected for some seconds, with his head to one side. " I have never done anything so fine as this before," he observed; " regard the atmosphere of it ! "

" It is execrable ! " replied Tricotrin, and went next door to Flamant. " My old one," he explained, " I have urgent need of a regal apartment for two hours to-morrow—have you a wealthy friend who would accommodate me ? "

" You may beautify your bedroom with all my possessions," returned Flamant heartily. " I have a stuffed parrot that is most decorative, but I have not a friend that is wealthy."

" You express yourself like a First Course for the Foreigner," said Tricotrin, much annoyed. " Devil take your stuffed parrot ! "

The heat of the sun increased towards midday, and drops began to trickle under the young man's hat. By four o'clock he had called upon sixty-two persons, exclusive of Sanquereau, whom he had been unable to wake. He bethought himself of Lajeunie, the novelist; but Lajeunie could offer him nothing more serviceable than a pass for the Elysée-Montmartre. "Now how is it possible that I spend my life among such imbeciles?" groaned the unhappy poet; "one offers me a parrot, and another a pass for a dancing-hall! Can I assure my uncle, who is a married man, and produces silk in vast quantities, that I reside in a dancing-hall? Besides, we know those passes—they are available only for ladies."

"It is true that you could not get in by it," assented Lajeunie, "but I give it to you freely. Take it, my poor fellow! Though it may appear inadequate to the occasion, who knows but what it will prove to be the basis of a fortune?"

"You are as crazy as the stories you write," said Tricotrin. "Still, it can go in my pocket." And he made, exhausted, for a bench in the place Dancourt, where he apostrophised his fate.

Thus occupied, he fell asleep; and presently a young woman sauntered from the sidewalk across the square. In the shady little place Dancourt is the little white Théâtre Montmartre, and she first perused the play-bill, and then contemplated the sleeping poet. It may have been that she found something attractive in his bearing, or it may have been that ragamuffins sprawled elsewhere; but, having determined to wait awhile, she selected the bench on which he reposed, and forthwith woke him.

"Now this is nice!" he exclaimed, realising his lapse with a start.

"Oh, monsieur!" said she, blushing.

"Pardon; I referred to my having dozed when every moment is of consequence," he explained. "And yet," he went on ruefully, "upon my soul, I cannot conjecture where I shall go next!"

Her response was so sympathetic that it tempted him to remain a little longer, and in five minutes she was recounting her own perplexities. It transpired that she was a lady's-maid with a holiday, and the problem before her was whether to spend her money on a theatre, or on a ball.

"Now that is a question which is disposed of instantly," said Tricotrin. "You shall spend your money on a theatre, and go to a ball as well." And out fluttered the pink pass presented to him by Lajeunie.

The girl's tongue was as lively as her gratitude. She was, she told him, maid to the famous Colette Aubray, who had gone unattended that afternoon to visit the owner of a villa in the country, where she would stay until the next day but one. "So you see, monsieur, we poor servants are left alone in the flat to amuse ourselves as best we can ! "

" Mon Dieu ! " ejaculated Tricotrin, and added mentally, " It was decidedly the good kind fairies that pointed to this bench ! "

He proceeded to pay the young woman such ardent attentions that she assumed he meant to accompany her to the ball, and her disappointment was extreme when he had to own that the state of his finances forbade it. " All I can suggest, my dear Léonie," he concluded, " is that I shall be your escort when you leave. It is abominable that you must have other partners in the meantime, but I feel that you will be constant to me in your thoughts. I shall have much to tell you—I shall whisper a secret in your ear; for, incredible as it may sound, my sweet child, you alone in Paris have the power to save me ! "

" Oh, monsieur ! " faltered the admiring lady's-maid, " it has always been my great ambition to save a young man, especially a young man who used such lovely language. I am sure, by the way you talk, that you must be a poet ! "

" Extraordinary," mused Tricotrin, " that all the world recognises me as a poet, excepting when it reads my poetry ! " And this led him to reflect that he must sell some of it, in order to provide refreshment for Léonie before he begged her aid. Accordingly, he arranged to meet her when the ball finished, and limped back to the attic, where he made up a choice assortment of his wares.

He had resolved to try the office of *Le Demi-Mot;* but his reception there was cold. "You should not presume on our good nature," demurred the Editor; "only last month we had an article on you, saying that you were highly talented, and now you ask us to publish your work besides. There must be a limit to such things."

He examined the collection, nevertheless, with a depreciatory countenance, and offered ten francs for three of the finest specimens. "From *Le Demi-Mot* I would counsel you to accept low terms," he said, with engaging interest, "on account of the prestige you derive from appearing in it."

"In truth it is a noble thing, prestige," admitted Tricotrin; "but, monsieur, I have never known a man able to make a meal of it when he was starving, or to warm himself before it when he was without a fire. Still—though it is a jumble-sale price—let them go!"

"Payment will be made in due course," said the Editor, and became immersed in correspondence.

Tricotrin paled to the lips, and the next five minutes were terrible; indeed, he did not doubt that he would have to limp elsewhere. At last he cried, "Well, let us say seven francs, cash!

Seven francs in one's fist are worth ten in due course." And thus the bargain was concluded.

"It was well for Hercules that none of his labours was the extraction of payment from an editor!" panted the poet on the doorstep. But he was now enabled to fête the lady's-maid in grand style, and—not to be outdone in generosity—she placed mademoiselle Aubray's flat at his disposal directly he asked for it.

"You have accomplished a miracle!" averred Pitou, in the small hours, when he heard the news.

Tricotrin waved a careless hand. "To a man of resource all things are possible!" he murmured.

The next evening the silk manufacturer was warmly embraced on the platform, and not a little surprised to learn that his nephew expected a visit at once. However, the young man's consternation was so profound when objections were made that, in the end, they were withdrawn. Tricotrin directed the driver after monsieur Rigaud was in the cab, and, on their reaching the courtyard, there was Léonie, all frills, ready to carry the handbag.

"Your servant?" inquired monsieur Rigaud, with some disapproval, as they went upstairs; "she is rather fancifully dressed, hein?"

"Is it so?" answered Tricotrin. "Perhaps a bachelor is not sufficiently observant in these matters. Still, she is an attentive domestic.

Take off your things, my dear uncle, and make yourself at home. What joy it gives me to see you here!"

"Mon Dieu," exclaimed the silk manufacturer, looking about him, "you have a place fit for a prince! It must have cost a pretty penny."

"Between ourselves," said Tricotrin, "I often reproach myself for what I spent on it; I could make very good use to-day of some of the money I squandered."

"What curtains!" murmured monsieur Rigaud, fingering the silk enraptured. "The quality is superb! What may they have charged you for these curtains?"

"It was years ago—upon my word I do not remember," drawled Tricotrin, who had no idea whether he ought to say five hundred francs, or five thousand. "Also, you must not think I have bought everything you see—many of the pictures and bronzes are presents from admirers of my work. It is gratifying, hein?"

"I—I—— To confess the truth, we had not heard of your triumphs," admitted monsieur Rigaud; "I did not dream you were so successful."

"Ah, it is in a very modest way," Tricotrin replied. "I am not a millionaire, I assure you! On the contrary, it is often difficult to make both ends meet—although," he added hurriedly, "I live with the utmost economy, my uncle. The days of my thoughtlessness are past. A man should save, a man should provide for the future."

At this moment he was astonished to see Léonie open the door and announce that dinner was served. She had been even better than her word.

"Dinner?" cried monsieur Rigaud. "Ah, now I understand why you were so dejected when I would not come!"

"Bah, it will be a very simple meal," said his nephew, "but after a journey one must eat. Let us go in." He was turning the wrong way, but Léonie's eye saved him.

"Come," he proceeded, taking his seat, "some soup—some good soup! What will you drink, my uncle?"

"On the sideboard I see champagne," chuckled monsieur Rigaud; "you treat the old man well, you rogue!"

"Hah," said Tricotrin, who had not observed it, "the cellar, I own, is an extravagance of mine! Alone, I drink only mineral waters, or a little claret, much diluted; but to my dearest friends I must give the dearest wines. Léonie, champagne!"

It was a capital dinner, and the cigars and cigarettes that Léonie put on the table with the coffee were of the highest excellence. Agreeable conversation whiled away some hours, and

Tricotrin began to look for his uncle to get up. But it was raining smartly, and monsieur Rigaud was reluctant to bestir himself. Another hour lagged by, and at last Tricotrin faltered:

"I fear I must beg you to excuse me for leaving you, my uncle; it is most annoying, but I am compelled to go out. The fact is, I have consented to collaborate with Capus, and he is so eccentric, this dear Alfred—we shall be at work all night."

"Go, my good Gustave," said his uncle readily; "and, as I am very tired, if you have no objection, I will occupy your bed."

Tricotrin's jaw dropped, and it was by a supreme effort that he stammered how pleased the arrangement would make him. To intensify the fix, Léonie and the cook had disappeared—doubtless to the mansarde in which they slept—and he was left to cope with the catastrophe alone. However, having switched on the lights, he conducted the elderly gentleman to an enticing apartment. He wished him an affectionate "good-night," and after promising to wake him early, made for home, leaving the manufacturer sleepily surveying the room's imperial splendour.

"What magnificence!" soliloquised monsieur Rigaud. "What toilet articles!" He got into bed. "What a coverlet—there must be twenty thousand francs on top of me!"

He had not slumbered under them long when he was aroused by such a commotion that he feared for the action of his heart. Blinking in the glare, he perceived Léonie in scanty attire, distracted on her knees—and, by the bedside, a beautiful lady in a travelling cloak, raging with the air of a lioness.

"Go away!" quavered the manufacturer. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"Intrusion?" raved the lady. "That is what you will explain, monsieur! How comes it that you are in my bed?"

"Yours?" ejaculated monsieur Rigaud. "What is it you say? You are making a grave error, for which you will apologise, madame!"

"Ah, hold me back," pleaded the lady, throwing up her eyes, "hold me back or I shall assault him!" She flung to Léonie. "Wretched girl, you shall pay for this! Not content with lavishing my champagne and my friend's cigars on your lover, you must put him to recuperate in my room!"

"Oh!" gasped the manufacturer, and hid his head under the priceless coverlet. "Such an imputation is unpardonable," he roared, reappearing. "I am monsieur Rigaud, of Lyons; the flat belongs to my nephew, monsieur Tricotrin; I request you to retire!"

"Imbecile!" screamed the lady; "the flat belongs to *me*—Colette Aubray. And your presence may ruin me—I expect a visitor on most important business! He has not my self-control; if he finds you here he will most certainly send you a challenge. He is the best swordsman in Paris! I advise you to believe me, for you have just five minutes to save your life!"

"Monsieur," wailed Léonie, "you have been deceived!" And, between her sobs, she confessed the circumstances, which he heard with the greatest difficulty, owing to the chattering of his teeth.

The rain was descending in cataracts when monsieur Rigaud got outside, but though the trams and the trains had both stopped running, and cabs were as dear as radium, his fury was so tempestuous that nothing could deter him from reaching the poet's real abode. His attack on the front door warned Tricotrin and Pitou what had happened, and they raised themselves, blanched, from their pillows, to receive his curses. It was impossible to reason with him, and he launched the most frightful denunciation at his nephew for an hour, when the abatement of the downpour permitted him to depart. More, at noon, who should arrive but Léonie in tears! She had been dismissed from her employment, and came to beg the poet to intercede for her.

"What calamities!" groaned Tricotrin. "How fruitless are man's noblest endeavours without the favouring breeze! I shall drown myself at eight o'clock. However, I will readily plead for you first, if your mistress will receive me."

By the maid's advice he presented himself late in the day, and when he had cooled his heels in the salon for some time, a lady entered, who was of such ravishing appearance that his head swam.

"Monsieur Tricotrin?" she inquired haughtily. "I have heard your name from your uncle, monsieur. Are you here to visit my servant?"

"Mademoiselle," he faltered, "I am here to throw myself on your mercy. At eight o'clock I have decided to commit suicide, for I am ruined. The only hope left me is to win your pardon before I die."

"I suppose your uncle has disowned you?" she said. "Naturally! It was a pretty situation to put him in. How would you care to be in it yourself?"

"Alas, mademoiselle," sighed Tricotrin, "there are situations to which a poor poet may not aspire!"

After regarding him silently she exclaimed, "I cannot understand what a boy with eyes like yours saw in Léonie?"

"Merely good nature and a means to an end, believe me! If you would ease my last moments, reinstate her in your service. Do not let me drown with the knowledge that another is suffering for my fault! Mademoiselle, I entreat you—take her back!"

"And why should I ease your last moments?" she demurred.

"Because I have no right to ask it; because I have no defence for my sin towards you; because you would be justified in trampling on me—and to pardon would be sublime!"

"You are very eloquent for my maid," returned the lady.

He shook his head. "Ah, no—I fear I am pleading for myself. For, if you reinstate the girl, it will prove that you forgive the man—and I want your forgiveness so much!" He fell at her feet.

"Does your engagement for eight o'clock press, monsieur?" murmured the lady, smiling. "If you could dine here again to-night, I might relent by degrees."

"And she is adorable!" he told Pitou. "I passed the most delicious evening of my life!"

"It is fortunate," observed Pitou, "for that, and your uncle's undying enmity, are all you have obtained by your imposture. Remember that the evening cost two thousand francs a year!"

"Ah, misanthrope," cried Tricotrin radiantly, "there must be a crumpled roseleaf in every Eden!"

## THE FATAL FLOROZONDE

Before Pitou, the composer, left for the Hague, he called on Théophile de Fronsac, the poet. *La Voix Parisienne* had lately appointed de Fronsac to its staff, on condition that he contributed no poetry.

"Good-evening," said de Fronsac. "Mon Dieu! what shall I write about?"

"Write about my music," said Pitou, whose compositions had been rejected in every arrondissement of Paris.

"Let us talk sanely," demurred de Fronsac. "My causerie is half a column short. Tell me something interesting."

"Woman!" replied Pitou.

De Fronsac flicked his cigarette ash. "You remind me," he said, "how much I need a love affair; my sensibilities should be stimulated. To continue to write with fervour I require to adore again."

"It is very easy to adore," observed Pitou.

"Not at forty," lamented the other; "especially to a man in Class A. Don't forget, my young friend, that I have loved and been loved persistently for twenty-three years. I cannot adore a repetition, and it is impossible for me to discover a new type."

"All of which I understand," said Pitou, "excepting 'Class A.'"

"There are three kinds of men," explained the poet. "Class A are the men to whom women inevitably surrender. Class B consists of those whom they trust by instinct and confide in on the second day; these men acquire an extensive knowledge of the sex—but they always fall short of winning the women for themselves. Class C women think of merely as 'the others'—they do not count; eventually they marry, and try to persuade their wives that they were devils of fellows when they were young. However, such reflections will not assist me to finish my causerie, for I wrote them all last week."

"Talking of women," remarked Pitou, "a little blonde has come to live opposite our lodging. So far we have only bowed from our windows, but I have christened her 'Lynette,' and Tricotrin has made a poem about her. It is pathetic. The last verse—the others are not written yet—goes:

"'O window I watched in the days that are dead,
Are you watched by a lover to-day?
Are glimpses caught now of another blonde head
By a youth who lives over the way?
Does *she* repeat words that Lynette's lips have said—
And does *he* say what *I* used to say?'"

"What is the answer?" asked de Fronsac. "Is it a conundrum? In any case it is a poor substitute for half a column of prose in *La Voix*. How on earth am I to arrive at the bottom of the page? If I am short in my copy, I shall be short in my rent; if I am short in my rent, I shall be put out of doors; if I am put out of doors, I shall die of exposure. And much good it will do me that they erect a statue to me in the next generation! Upon my word, I would stand a dinner—at the two-franc place where you may eat all you can hold—if you could give me a subject."

"It happens," said Pitou, "that I can give you a very strange one. As I am going to a foreign land, I have been to the country to bid farewell to my parents; I came across an extraordinary girl."

"One who disliked presents?" inquired de Fronsac.

"I am not jesting. She is a dancer in a travelling circus. The flare and the drum wooed me one night, and I went in. As a circus, well, you may imagine—a tent in a fair. My fauteuil was a plank, and the orchestra surpassed the worst tortures of the Inquisition. And then, after the decrepit horses, and a mangy lion, a girl came into the ring, with the most marvellous eyes I have ever seen in a human face. They are green eyes, with golden lights in them."

"Really?" murmured the poet. "I have never been loved by a girl who had green eyes with golden lights in them."

"I am glad you have never been loved by this one," returned the composer gravely; "she has a curious history. All her lovers, without exception, have committed suicide."

"What?" said de Fronsac, staring.

"It is very queer. One of them had just inherited a hundred thousand francs—he hanged himself. Another, an author from Italy, took poison, while all Rome was reading his novel. To be infatuated by her is harmless enough, but to win her is invariably fatal within a few weeks. Some time ago she attached herself to one of the troupe, and soon afterwards he discovered she was deceiving him. He resolved to shoot her. He pointed a pistol at her breast. She simply laughed—and *looked at him*. He turned the pistol on himself, and blew his brains out!"

De Fronsac had already written: "Here is the extraordinary history of a girl whom I discovered in a fair." The next moment:

"But you repeat a rumour," he objected. "*La Voix Parisienne* has a reputation; odd as the fact may appear to you, people read it. If this is published in *La Voix* it will attract attention. Soon she will be promoted from a tent in a fair to a stage in Paris. Well, what happens? You tell me she is beautiful, so she will have hundreds of admirers. Among the hundreds there will be one she favours. And then? Unless he committed suicide in a few weeks, the paper would be proved a liar. I should not be able to sleep of nights for fear he would not kill himself."

"My dear," exclaimed Pitou with emotion, "would I add to your anxieties? Rather than you should be disturbed by anybody's living, let us dismiss the subject, and the dinner, and talk of my new Symphony. On the other hand, I fail to see that the paper's reputation is your affair—it is not your wife; and I am more than usually empty to-day."

"Your argument is sound," said de Fronsac. "Besides, the Editor refuses my poetry." And he wrote without cessation for ten minutes.

The two-franc table-d'hôte excelled itself that evening, and Pitou did ample justice to the menu.

Behold how capricious is the jade, Fame! The poet whose verses had left him obscure, accomplished in ten minutes a paragraph that fascinated all Paris. On the morrow people pointed it out to one another; the morning after, other journals referred to it; in the afternoon the Editor of *La Voix Parisienne* was importuned with questions. No one believed the story to be true, but not a soul could help wondering if it might be so.

When a day or two had passed, Pitou received from de Fronsac a note which ran:

"Send to me at once, I entreat thee, the name of that girl, and say where she can be found. The managers of three variety theatres of the first class have sought me out and are eager to engage her."

"Decidedly," said Pitou, "I have mistaken my vocation—I ought to have been a novelist!" And he replied:

"The girl whose eyes suggested the story to me is called on the programmes 'Florozonde.' For the rest, I know nothing, except that thou didst offer a dinner and I was hungry."

However, when he had written this, he destroyed it.

"Though I am unappreciated myself, and shall probably conclude in the Morgue," he mused, "that is no excuse for my withholding prosperity from others. Doubtless the poor girl would rejoice to appear at three variety theatres of the first class, or even at one of them." He answered simply:

"Her name is 'Florozonde'; she will be found in a circus at Chartres"—and nearly suffocated with laughter.

Then a little later the papers announced that Mlle. Florozonde—whose love by a strange series of coincidences had always proved fatal—would be seen at La Coupole. Posters bearing the name of "Florozonde"—yellow on black—invaded the boulevards. Her portrait caused crowds to assemble, and "That girl who, they say, deals death, that Florozonde!" was to be heard as constantly as ragtime.

By now Pitou was at the Hague, his necessities having driven him into the employment of a Parisian who had opened a shop there for the sale of music and French pianos. When he read the Paris papers, Pitou trembled so violently that the onlookers thought he must have ague. Hilarity struggled with envy in his breast. "Ma foi!" he would say to himself, "it seems that my destiny is to create successes for others. Here am I, exiled, and condemned to play cadenzas all day in a piano warehouse, while she whom I invented, dances jubilant in Paris. I do not doubt that she breakfasts at Armenonville, and dines at Paillard's."

And it was a fact that Florozonde was the fashion. As regards her eyes, at any rate, the young man had not exaggerated more than was to be forgiven in an artist; her eyes were superb, supernatural; and now that the spangled finery of a fair was replaced by the most triumphant of audacities—now that a circus band had been exchanged for the orchestra of La Coupole—she danced as she had not danced before. You say that a gorgeous costume cannot improve a woman's dancing? Let a woman realise that you improve her appearance, and you improve everything that she can do!

Nevertheless one does not pretend that it was owing to her talent, or her costume, or the weird melody proposed by the chef d'orchestre, that she became the rage. Not at all. That was due to her reputation. Sceptics might smile and murmur the French for "Rats!" but, again, nobody could say positively that the tragedies had not occurred. And above all, there were the eyes—it was conceded that a woman with eyes like that *ought* to be abnormal. La Coupole was thronged every night, and the stage doorkeeper grew rich, so numerous were the daring spirits, coquetting with death, who tendered notes inviting the Fatal One to supper.

Somehow the suppers were rather dreary. The cause may have been that the guest was handicapped by circumstances—to be good company without discarding the fatal air was extremely difficult; also the cause may have been that the daring spirits felt their courage forsake them in a tête-à-tête; but it is certain that once when Florozonde drove home in the small hours to the tattered aunt who lived on her, she exclaimed violently that, "All this silly fake was giving her the hump, and that she wished she were 'on the road' again, with a jolly good fellow who was not afraid of her!"

Then the tattered aunt cooed to her, reminding her that little ducklings had run to her already roasted, and adding that she (the tattered aunt) had never heard of equal luck in all the years she had been in the show business.

"Ah, zut!" cried Florozonde. "It does not please me to be treated as if I had scarlet fever. If I lean towards a man, he turns pale."

"Life is good," said her aunt philosophically, "and men have no wish to die for the sake of an embrace—remember your reputation! Il faut souffrir pour être fatale. Look at your salary, sweetie—and you have had nothing to do but hold your tongue! Ah, was anything ever heard like it? A miracle of le bon Dieu!"

"It was monsieur de Fronsac, the journalist, who started it," said Florozonde. "I supposed he had made it up, to give me a lift; but, ma foi, I think *he* half believes it, too! What can have put it in his head? I have a mind to ask him the next time he comes behind."

"What a madness!" exclaimed the old woman; "you might queer your pitch! Never, never perform a trick with a confederate when you can work alone; that is one of the first rules of life. If he thinks it is true, so much the better. Now get to bed, lovey, and think of pleasant things—what did you have for supper?"

Florozonde was correct in her surmise—de Fronsac did half believe it, and de Fronsac was accordingly much perturbed. Consider his dilemma! The nature of his pursuits had demanded a love affair, and he had endeavoured conscientiously to comply, for the man was nothing if not an artist. But, as he had said to Pitou, he had loved so much, and so many, that the thing was practically impossible for him. He was like the pastrycook's boy who is habituated and bilious. Then suddenly a new type, which he had despaired of finding, was displayed. His curiosity awoke; and, fascinated in the first instance by her ghastly reputation, he was fascinated gradually by her physical charms. Again he found himself enslaved by a woman—and the woman, who owed her fame to his services, was clearly appreciative. But he had a strong objection to committing suicide.

His eagerness for her love was only equalled by his dread of what might happen if she gave it to him. Alternately he yearned, and shuddered. On Monday he cried, "Idiot, to be frightened by such blague!" and on Tuesday he told himself, "All the same, there may be something in it!"

It was thus tortured that he paid his respects to Florozonde at the theatre on the evening after she complained to her aunt. She was in her dressing-room, making ready to go.

"You have danced divinely," he said to her. "There is no longer a programme at La Coupole—there is only 'Florozonde.'"

She smiled the mysterious smile that she was cultivating. "What have you been doing with yourself, monsieur? I have not seen you all the week."

De Fronsac sighed expressively. "At my age one has the wisdom to avoid temptation."

"May it not be rather unkind to temptation?" she suggested, raising her marvellous eyes.

De Fronsac drew a step back. "Also I have had a great deal to do," he added formally; "I am a busy man. For example, much as I should like to converse with you now——" But his resolution forsook him and he was unable to say that he had looked in only for a minute.

"Much as you would like to converse with me——?" questioned Florozonde.

"I ought, by rights, to be seated at my desk," he concluded lamely.

"I am pleased that you are not seated at your desk," she said.

"Because?" murmured de Fronsac, with unspeakable emotions.

"Because I have never thanked you enough for your interest in me, and I want to tell you that I remember." She gave him her hand. He held it, battling with terror.

"Mademoiselle," he returned tremulously, "when I wrote the causerie you refer to, my interest in you was purely the interest of a journalist, so for that I do not deserve your thanks. But since I have had the honour to meet you I have experienced an interest altogether different; the interest of a man, of a—a——" Here his teeth chattered, and he paused.

"Of a what?" she asked softly, with a dreamy air.

"Of a friend," he muttered. A gust of fear had made the "friend" an iceberg. But her clasp tightened.

"I am glad," she said. "Ah, you have been good to me, monsieur! And if, in spite of everything, I am sometimes sad, I am, at least, never ungrateful."

"You are sad?" faltered the vacillating victim. "Why?"

Her bosom rose. "Is success all a woman wants?"

"Ah!" exclaimed de Fronsac, in an impassioned quaver, "is that not life? To all of us there is the unattainable—to you, to me!"

"To you?" she murmured. Her eyes were transcendental. Admiration and alarm tore him in halves.

"In truth," he gasped, "I am the most miserable of men! What is genius, what is fame, when one is lonely and unloved?"

She moved impetuously closer—so close that the perfume of her hair intoxicated him. His heart seemed to knock against his ribs, and he felt the perspiration burst out on his brow. For an instant he hesitated—on the edge of his grave, he thought. Then he dropped her hand, and backed from her. "But why should I bore you with my griefs?" he stammered. "Au revoir, mademoiselle!"

Outside the stage door he gave thanks for his self-control. Also, pale with the crisis, he registered an oath not to approach her again.

Meanwhile the expatriated Pitou had remained disconsolate. Though the people at the Hague spoke French, they said foreign things to him in it. He missed Montmartre—the interests of home. While he waxed eloquent to customers on the tone of pianos, or the excellence of rival composers' melodies, he was envying Florozonde in Paris. Florozonde, whom he had created, obsessed the young man. In the evening he read about her at Van der Pyl's; on Sundays, when the tram carried him to drink beer at Scheveningen, he read about her in the Kurhaus. And then the unexpected happened. In this way:

Pitou was discharged.

Few things could have surprised him more, and, to tell the truth, few things could have troubled him less. "It is better to starve in Paris than grow fat in Holland," he observed. He jingled his capital in his trouser-pocket, in fancy savoured his dinner cooking at the Café du Bel Avenir, and sped from the piano shop as if it had been on fire.

The clock pointed to a quarter to six as Nicolas Pitou, composer, emerged from the gare du

Nord, and lightly swinging the valise that contained his wardrobe, proceeded to the rue des Trois Frères. Never had it looked dirtier, or sweeter. He threw himself on Tricotrin's neck; embraced the concierge—which took her breath away, since she was ill-favoured and most disagreeable; fared sumptuously for one franc fifty at the Café du Bel Avenir—where he narrated adventures abroad that surpassed de Rougemont's; and went to La Coupole.

And there, jostled by the crowd, the poor fellow looked across the theatre at the triumphant woman he had invented—and fell in love with her.

One would have said there was more than the width of a theatre between them—one would have said the distance was interminable. Who in the audience could suspect that Florozonde would have been unknown but for a boy in the Promenoir?

Yes, he fell in love — with her beauty, her grace—perhaps also with the circumstances. The theatre rang with plaudits; the curtain hid her; and he went out, dizzy with romance. He could not hope to speak to her to-night, but he was curious to see her when she left. He decided that on the morrow he would call upon de Fronsac, whom she doubtless knew now, and ask him for an introduction. Promising himself this, he reached the stage door—where de Fronsac, with trembling limbs, stood giving thanks for his self-control.

"My friend!" cried Pitou enthusiastically, "how rejoiced I am to meet you!" and nearly wrung his hand off.

"Aïe! Gently!" expostulated de Fronsac, writhing. "Aïe, aïe! I did not know you loved me so much. So you are back from Sweden, hein?"

"Yes. I have not been there, but why should we argue about geography? What were you doing as I came up—reciting your poems? By the way, I have a favour to ask; I want you to introduce me to Florozonde."

"Never!" answered the poet firmly; "I have too much affection for you—I have just resolved not to see her again myself. Besides, I thought you knew her in the circus?"

"I never spoke to her there—I simply admired her from the plank. Come, take me inside, and present me!"

"It is impossible," persisted de Fronsac; "I tell you I will not venture near her any more. Also, she is coming out—that is her coupé that you see waiting."

She came out as he spoke, and, affecting not to recognise him, moved rapidly towards the carriage. But this would not do for Pitou at all. "Mademoiselle!" he exclaimed, sweeping his hat nearly to the pavement.

"Yes, well?" she said sharply, turning.

"I have just begged my friend de Fronsac to present me to you, and he feared you might not pardon his presumption. May I implore you to pardon mine?"

She smiled. There was the instant in which neither the man nor the woman knows who will speak next, nor what is to be said—the instant on which destinies hang. Pitou seized it.

"Mademoiselle, I returned to France only this evening. All the journey my thought was—to see you as soon as I arrived!"

"Your friend," she said, with a scornful glance towards de Fronsac, who sauntered gracefully away, "would warn you that you are rash."

"I am not afraid of his warning."

"Are you not afraid of *me?*"

"Afraid only that you will banish me too soon."

"Mon Dieu! then you must be the bravest man in Paris," she said.

"At any rate I am the luckiest for the moment."

Now it was a delightful change to Florozonde to meet a man who was not alarmed by her; and it pleased her to show de Fronsac that his cowardice had not left her inconsolable. She laughed loud enough for him to hear.

"I ought not to be affording you the luck," she answered. "I have friends waiting for me at the Café de Paris."

"I expected some such blow," said Pitou. "And how can I suppose you will disappoint your friends in order to sup with me at the Café du Bel Avenir instead?"

"The Café du——?" She was puzzled.

"Bel Avenir."

"I do not know it."

"Nor would your coachman. We should walk there—and our supper would cost three francs, wine included."

"Is it an invitation?"

"It is a prayer."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Nicolas Pitou."

"Of Paris?"

"Of bohemia."

"What do you do in it?"

"Hunger, and make music."

"Unsuccessful?"

"Not to-night!"

"Take me to the Bel Avenir," she said, and sent the carriage away.

De Fronsac, looking back as they departed, was distressed to see the young man risking his life.

At the Bel Avenir their entrance made a sensation. She removed her cloak, and Pitou arranged it over two chairs. Then she threw her gloves out of the way, in the bread-basket; and the waiter and the proprietress, and all the family, did homage to her toilette.

"Who would have supposed?" she smiled, and her smile forgot to be mysterious.

"That the restaurant would be so proud?"

"That I should be supping with you in it! Tell me, you had no hope of this on your journey? It was true about your journey, hein?"

"Ah, really! No, how could I hope? I went round after your dance simply to see you closer; and then I met de Fronsac, and then——"

"And then you were very cheeky. Answer! Why do I interest you? Because of what they say of me?"

"Not altogether."

"What else?"

"Because you are so beautiful. Answer! Why did you come to supper with me? To annoy some other fellow?"

"Not altogether."

"What else?"

"Because you were not frightened of me. Are you sure you are not frightened? Oh, remember, remember your horrible fate if I should like you too much!"

"It would be a thumping advertisement for you," said Pitou. "Let me urge you to try to secure it."

"Reckless boy!" she laughed. "Pour out

some more wine. Ah, it is good, this! it is like old times. The strings of onions on the dear, dirty walls, and the serviettes that are so nice and damp! It was in restaurants like this, if my salary was paid, I used to sup on fête days."

"And if it was not paid?"

"I supped in imagination. My dear, I have had a cigarette for a supper, and the grass for a bed. I have tramped by the caravan while the stars faded, and breakfasted on the drum in the tent. And you—on a bench in the Champs Elysées, hein?"

"It has occurred."

"And you watched the sun rise, and made music, and wished *you* could rise, too? I must hear your music some day. You shall write me a dance. Is it agreed?"

"The contract is already stamped," said Pitou.

"I am glad I met you—it is the best supper I have had in Paris. Why are you calculating the expenses on the back of the bill of fare?"

"I am not. I am composing your dance," said Pitou. "Don't speak for a minute, it will be sublime! Also it will be a souvenir when you have gone."

But she did not go for a long while. It was late when they left the Café du Bel Avenir, still talking—and there was always more to say. By this time Pitou did not merely love her beauty—he adored the woman. As for Florozonde, she no longer merely loved his courage—she approved the man.

Listen: he was young, fervid, and an artist; his proposal was made before they reached her doorstep, and she consented!

Their attachment was the talk of the town, and everybody waited to hear that Pitou had killed himself. His name was widely known at last. But weeks and months went by; Florozonde's protracted season came to an end; and still he looked radiantly well. Pitou was the most unpopular man in Paris.

In the rue Dauphine, one day, he met de Fronsac.

"So you are still alive!" snarled the poet.

"Never better," declared Pitou. "It turns out," he added confidentially, "there was nothing in that story—it was all fudge."

"Evidently! I must congratulate you," said de Fronsac, looking bomb-shells.

## THE OPPORTUNITY OF PETITPAS

In Bordeaux, on the 21st of December, monsieur Petitpas, a clerk with bohemian yearnings, packed his portmanteau for a week's holiday. In Paris, on the same date, monsieur Tricotrin, poet and pauper, was commissioned by the Editor of *Le Demi-Mot* to convert a rough translation into literary French. These two disparate incidents were destined by Fate—always mysterious in her workings—to be united in a narrative for the present volume.

Three evenings later the poet's concierge climbed the stairs and rapped peremptorily at the door.

"Well?" cried Tricotrin, raising bloodshot eyes from the manuscript; "who disturbs me now? Come in!"

"I have come in," panted madame Dubois, who had not waited for his invitation, "and I am here to tell you, monsieur, that you cannot be allowed to groan in this agonised fashion. Your lamentations can be heard even in the basement."

"Is it in my agreement, madame, that I shall not groan if I am so disposed?" inquired the poet haughtily.

"There are things tacitly understood. It is enough that you are in arrears with your rent, without your doing your best to drive away the other tenants. For two days they have all complained that it would be less disturbing to reside in a hospital."

"Well, they have my permission to remove there," said Tricotrin. "Now that the matter is settled, let me get on with my work!" And with the groan of a soul in Hades, he perused another line.

"There you go again!" expostulated the woman angrily. "It is not to be endured, monsieur. What is the matter with you, for goodness' sake?"

"With me, madame, there is nothing the matter; the fault lies with an infernal Spanish novel. A misguided editor has commissioned me to rewrite it from a translation made by a foreigner. How can I avoid groans when I read his rot? Miranda exclaims, 'May heaven confound you, bandit!' And the fiancé of the ingénue addresses her as 'Angel of this house!'"

"Well, at least groan quietly," begged the concierge; "do not bellow your sufferings to the cellar."

"To oblige you I will be as Spartan as I can," agreed Tricotrin. "Now I have lost my place in the masterpiece. Ah, here we are! 'I feel she brings bad tidings—she wears a disastrous mien.' It is sprightly dialogue! If the hundred and fifty francs were not essential to keep a roof over my head, I would send the Editor a challenge for offering me the job."

Perspiration bespangled the young man's brow as he continued his task. When another hour had worn by he thirsted to do the foreign translator a bodily injury, and so intense was his exasperation that, by way of interlude, he placed the manuscript on the floor and jumped on it. But the climax was reached in Chapter XXVII; under the provocation of the love scene in Chapter XXVII frenzy mastered him, and with a yell of torture he hurled the whole novel through the window, and burst into hysterical tears.

The novel, which was of considerable bulk, descended on the landlord, who was just approaching the house to collect his dues.

"What does it mean," gasped monsieur Gouge, when he had recovered his equilibrium, and his hat; "what does it mean that I cannot approach my own property without being assaulted with a ton of paper? Who has dared to throw such a thing from a window?"

"Monsieur," stammered the concierge, "I

do not doubt that it was the top-floor poet; he has been behaving like a lunatic for days."

"Aha, the top-floor poet?" snorted monsieur Gouge. "I shall soon dispose of *him!*" And Tricotrin's tears were scarcely dried when *bang* came another knock at his door.

"So, monsieur," exclaimed the landlord, with fine satire, "your poems are of small account, it appears, since you use them as missiles? The value you put upon your scribbling does not encourage me to wait for my rent!"

"Mine?" faltered Tricotrin, casting an indignant glance at the muddy manuscript restored to him; "you accuse *me* of having perpetrated that atrocity? Oh, this is too much! I have a reputation to preserve, monsieur, and I swear by all the Immortals that it was no work of mine."

"Did you not throw it?"

"Throw it? Yes, assuredly I threw it. But I did not write it."

"Morbleu! what do I care who wrote it?" roared monsieur Gouge, purple with spleen. "Does its authorship improve the condition of my hat? My grievance is its arrival on my head, not its literary quality. Let me tell you that you expose yourself to actions at law, pitching weights like this from a respectable house into a public street."

"I should plead insanity," said Tricotrin;

"twenty-seven chapters of that novel, translated into a Spaniard's French, would suffice to people an asylum. Nevertheless, if it arrived on your hat, I owe you an apology."

"You also owe me two hundred francs!" shouted the other, "and I have shown you more patience than you deserve. Well, my folly is finished! You settle up, or you get out, right off!"

"Have you reflected that it is Christmas Eve—do we live in a melodrama, that I should wander homeless on Christmas Eve? Seriously, you cannot expect a man of taste to lend himself to so hackneyed a situation? Besides, I share this apartment with the composer monsieur Nicolas Pitou. Consider how poignant he would find the room's associations if he returned to dwell here alone!"

"Monsieur Pitou will not be admitted when he returns—there is not a pin to choose between the pair of you. You hand me the two hundred francs, or you go this minute—and I shall detain your wardrobe till you pay. Where is it?"

"It is divided between my person and a shelf at the pawnbroker's," explained the poet; "but I have a soiled collar in the left-hand corner drawer. However, I can offer you more valuable security for this trifling debt than you would dare to ask; the bureau is full of pearls—metrical, but beyond price. I beg your tenderest care of them, especially my tragedy in seven acts. Do not play jinks with the contents of that bureau, or Posterity will gibbet you and the name of 'Gouge' will one day be execrated throughout France. Garbage, farewell!"

"Here, take your shaving paper with you!" cried monsieur Gouge, flinging the Spanish novel down the stairs. And the next moment the man of letters stood dejected on the pavement, with the fatal manuscript under his arm.

"Ah, Miranda, Miranda, thou little knowest what mischief thou hast done!" he murmured, unconsciously plagiarising. "She brought bad tidings indeed, with her disastrous mien," he added. "What is to become of me now?"

The moon, to which he had naturally addressed this query, made no answer; and, fingering the sou in his trouser-pocket, he trudged in the direction of the rue Ravignan. "The situation would look well in print," he reflected, "but the load under my arm should, dramatically, be a bundle of my own poems. Doubtless the matter will be put right by my biographer. I wonder if I can get half a bed from Goujaud?"

Encouraged by the thought of the painter's hospitality, he proceeded to the studio; but he was informed in sour tones that monsieur Goujaud would not sleep there that night.

"So much the better," he remarked, "for I can have all his bed, instead of half of it! Believe me, I shall put you to no trouble, madame."

"I believe it fully," answered the woman, "for you will not come inside—not monsieur Goujaud, nor you, nor any other of his vagabond friends. So, there!"

"Ah, is that how the wind blows—the fellow has not paid his rent?" said Tricotrin. "How disgraceful of him, to be sure! Fortunately Sanquereau lives in the next house."

He pulled the bell there forthwith, and the peal had scarcely sounded when Sanquereau rushed to the door, crying, "Welcome, my Beautiful!"

"Mon Dieu, what worthless acquaintances I possess!" moaned the unhappy poet. "Since you are expecting your Beautiful I need not go into details."

"What on earth did you want?" muttered Sanquereau, crestfallen.

"I came to tell you the latest Stop Press news—Goujaud's landlord has turned him out and I have no bed to lie on. Au revoir!"

After another apostrophe to the heavens, "That inane moon, which makes no response, is beginning to get on my nerves," he soliloquised. "Let me see now! There is certainly master Criquebœuf, but it is a long journey to the quartier Latin, and when I get there his social engagements may annoy me as keenly as Sanquereau's. It appears to me I am likely to try the open-air cure to-night. In the meanwhile I may as well find Miranda a seat and think things over."

Accordingly he bent his steps to the place Dancourt, and having deposited the incubus beside him, stretched his limbs on a bench beneath a tree. His attitude, and his luxuriant locks, to say nothing of his melancholy aspect, rendered him a noticeable figure in the little square, and monsieur Petitpas, from Bordeaux, under the awning of the café opposite, stood regarding him with enthusiasm.

"Upon my word of honour," mused Petitpas, rubbing his hands, "I believe I see a Genius in the dumps! At last I behold the Paris of my dreams. If I have read my Murger to any purpose, I am on the verge of an epoch. What a delightful adventure!"

Taking out his Marylands, Petitpas sauntered towards the bench with a great show of carelessness, and made a pretence of feeling in his pockets for a match. "Tschut!" he exclaimed; then, affecting to observe Tricotrin for the first time, "May I beg you to oblige me with a light, monsieur?" he asked deferentially. A puff of wind provided an excuse for sitting down to guard the flame; and the next moment the Genius had accepted a cigarette, and acknowledged that the weather was mild for the time of year.

Excitement thrilled Petitpas. How often, after business hours, he had perused his well-thumbed copy of *La Vie de Bohème* and in fancy consorted with the gay descendants of Rodolphe and Marcel; how often he had regretted secretly that he, himself, did not woo a Muse and jest at want in a garret, instead of totting up figures, and eating three meals a day in comfort! And now positively one of the fascinating beings of his imagination lolled by his side! The little clerk on a holiday longed to play the generous comrade. In his purse he had a couple of louis, designed for sight-seeing, and, with a rush of emotion, he pictured himself squandering five or six francs in half an hour and startling the artist by his prodigality.

"If I am not mistaken, I have the honour to address an author, monsieur?" he ventured.

"Your instincts have not misled you," replied the poet; "I am Tricotrin, monsieur—Gustave Tricotrin. The name, however, is to be found, as yet, on no statues."

"My own name," said the clerk, "is Adolphe Petitpas. I am a stranger in Paris, and I count myself fortunate indeed to have made monsieur Tricotrin's acquaintance so soon."

"He expresses himself with some discretion, this person," reflected Tricotrin. "And his cigarette was certainly providential!"

"To meet an author has always been an ambition of mine," Petitpas continued; "I dare to say that I have the artistic temperament, though circumstances have condemned me to commercial pursuits. You have no idea how enviable the literary life appears to me, monsieur ! "

" Its privileges are perhaps more monotonous than you suppose," drawled the homeless poet. " Also, I had to work for many years before I attained my present position."

" This noble book, for instance," began the clerk, laying a reverent hand on the abominable manuscript.

" Hein ? " exclaimed its victim, starting.

" To have written this noble book must be a joy compared with which my own prosperity is valueless."

" The damned thing is no work of mine," cried Tricotrin; " and if we are to avoid a quarrel, I will ask you not to accuse me of it ! A joy, indeed ? In that block of drivel you view the cause of my deepest misfortunes."

" A thousand apologies ! " stammered his companion; " my inference was hasty. But what you say interests me beyond words. This manuscript, of seeming innocence, is the cause of misfortunes ? May I crave an enormous favour; may I beg you to regard me as a friend and give me your confidence ? "

" I see no reason why I should refuse it," answered Tricotrin, on whom the boast of " prosperity " had made a deep impression. " You must know, then, that this ineptitude, inflicted on me by an eccentric editor for translation, drove me to madness, and not an hour ago I cast it from my window in disgust. It is a novel entirely devoid of taste and tact, and it had the clumsiness to alight on my landlord's head. Being a man of small nature, he retaliated by demanding his rent."

"Which it was not convenient to pay?" interrupted Petitpas, all the pages of *La Vie de Bohème* playing leapfrog through his brain.

"I regret to bore you by so trite a situation. 'Which it was not convenient to pay'! Indeed, I was not responsible for all of it, for I occupied the room with a composer named Pitou. Well, you can construct the next scene without a collaborator; the landlord has a speech, and the tragedy is entitled 'Tricotrin in Quest of a Home.'"

"What of the composer?" inquired the delighted clerk; "what has become of monsieur Pitou?"

"Monsieur Pitou was not on in that Act. The part of Pitou will attain prominence when he returns and finds himself locked out."

"But, my dear monsieur Tricotrin, in such an extremity you should have sought the services of a friend.'

"I had that inspiration myself; I sought a painter called Goujaud. And observe how careless is Reality in the matter of coincidences! I learnt from his concierge that precisely the same thing had befallen monsieur Goujaud. He, too, is Christmassing alfresco."

"Mon Dieu," faltered the clerk, "how it rejoices me that I have met you! All my life I have looked forward to encountering a genius in such a fix."

"Alas!" sighed Tricotrin, with a pensive smile, "to the genius the fix is less spicy. Without a supper——"

"Without a supper!" crowed Petitpas.

"Without a bed——"

"Without a bed!" babbled Petitpas, enravished.

"With nothing but a pen and the sacred fire, one may be forgiven sadness."

"Not so, not so," shouted Petitpas, smacking him on the back. "You are omitting *me* from your list of assets! Listen, I am staying at an hotel. You cannot decline to accord me the honour of welcoming you there as my guest for the night. Hang the expense! I am no longer in business, I am a bohemian, like yourself; some supper, a bed, and a little breakfast will not ruin me. What do you say, monsieur?"

"I say, drop the 'monsieur,' old chap," responded Tricotrin. "Your suggestions for the tragedy are cordially accepted. I have never known a collaborator to improve a plot so much.

And understand this: I feel more earnestly than I speak; henceforth we are pals, you and I."

"Brothers!" cried Petitpas, in ecstasy. "You shall hear all about a novel that I have projected for years. I should like to have your opinion of it."

"I shall be enchanted," said Tricotrin, his jaw dropping.

"You must introduce me to your circle—the painters, and the models, and the actresses. Your friends shall be *my* friends in future."

"Don't doubt it! When I tell them what a brick you are, they will be proud to know you."

"No ceremony, mind!"

"Not a bit. You shall be another chum. Already I feel as if we had been confidants in our cradles."

"It is the same with me. How true it is that kindred spirits recognise each other in an instant. What is environment? Bah! A man may be a bohemian and an artist although his occupations are commercial?"

"Perfectly! I nearly pined amid commercial occupations myself."

"What an extraordinary coincidence! Ah, that is the last bond between us! You can realise my most complex moods, you can penetrate to the most distant suburbs of my soul! Gustave, if I had been free to choose my career, I should have become a famous man."

"My poor Adolphe! Still, prosperity is not an unmixed evil. You must seek compensation in your wealth," murmured the poet, who began to think that one might pay too high a price for a bed.

"Oh—er—to be sure!" said the little clerk, reminded that he was pledged to a larger outlay than he had originally proposed. "That is to say, I am not precisely 'wealthy.'" He saw his pocket-money during the trip much curtailed, and rather wished that his impulse had been less expansive.

"A snug income is no stigma, whether one derives it from Parnassus or the Bourse," continued Tricotrin. "Hold! Who is that I see, slouching over there? As I live, it's Pitou, the composer, whose dilemma I told you of!"

"Another?" quavered the clerk, dismayed.

"Hé, Nicolas! Turn your symphonic gaze this way! 'Tis I, Gustave!"

"Ah, mon vieux!" exclaimed the young musician joyfully; "I was wondering what your fate might be. I have only just come from the house. Madame Dubois refused me admission; she informed me that you had been firing Spanish novels at Gouge's head. Why Spanish? Is the Spanish variety deadlier? So the villain has had the effrontery to turn us out?"

"Let me make you affinities known to each other," said Tricotrin. "My brother Nicolas—

my brother Adolphe. Brother Adolphe has received a scenario of the tragedy already, and he has a knack of inventing brilliant 'curtains.'" Behind Pitou's back he winked at Petitpas, as if to say, "He little suspects what a surprise you have in store for him!"

"Oh—er—I am grieved to hear of your trouble, monsieur Pitou," said Petitpas feebly.

"What? 'Grieved'? Come, that isn't all about it!" cried Tricotrin, who attributed his restraint to nothing but diffidence. In an undertone he added, "Don't be nervous, dear boy. Your invitation won't offend him in the least!"

Petitpas breathed heavily. He aspired to prove himself a true bohemian, but his heart quailed at the thought of such expense. Two suppers, two beds, and two little breakfasts as a supplement to his bill would be no joke. It was with a very poor grace that he stammered at last, "I hope you will allow me to suggest a way out, monsieur Pitou? A room at my hotel seems to dispose of the difficulty."

"Hein?" exclaimed Pitou. "Is that room a mirage, or are you serious?"

"'Serious'?" echoed Tricotrin. "He is as serious as an English adaptation of a French farce." He went on, under his breath, "You mustn't judge him by his manner, I can see that he has turned a little shy. Believe me, he is the King of Trumps."

"Well, upon my word I shall be delighted, monsieur," responded Pitou. "It was evidently the good kind fairies that led me to the place Dancourt. I would ask you to step over the way and have a bock, but my finances forbid."

"Your finances need cause no drought—Adolphe will be paymaster!" declared Tricotrin gaily, shouldering his manuscript. "Come, let us adjourn and give the Réveillon its due!"

Petitpas suppressed a moan. "By all means," he assented; "I was about to propose it myself. I am a real bohemian, you know, and think nothing of ordering several bocks at once."

"Are you sure he is all you say?" whispered Pitou to Tricotrin, with misgiving.

"A shade embarrassed, that is all," pronounced the poet. And then, as the trio moved arm-in-arm towards the café, a second solitary figure emerged from the obscurity of the square.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Tricotrin; "am I mistaken, or—— Look, look, Adolphe! I would bet ten to one in sonnets that it is Goujaud, the painter, whose plight I mentioned to you!"

"Yet another?" gasped Petitpas, panic-stricken.

"Sst! Hé, Goujaud! Come here, you vagrant, and be entertaining!"

"Well met, you fellows!" sighed Goujaud. "Where are you off to?"

"We are going to give Miranda a drink," said the poet; "she is drier than ever. Let there be no strangers—my brother Adolphe, my brother Théodose! What is your secret woe, Théo? Your face is as long as this Spaniard's novel. Adolphe, have you a recipe in your pocket for the hump?"

"Perhaps monsieur Goujaud will join us in a glass of beer?" said Petitpas very coldly.

"There are more unlikely things than that!" affirmed the painter; and when the café was entered, he swallowed his bock like one who has a void to fill. "The fact is," he confided to the group, "I was about to celebrate the Réveillon on a bench. That insolent landlord of mine has kicked me out."

"And you will not get inside," said Tricotrin, "'not you, nor I, nor any other of your vagabond friends. So there!' I had the privilege of conversing with your concierge earlier in the evening."

"Ah, then, you know all about it. Well, now that I have run across you, you can give me a shakedown in your attic. Good business!"

"I discern only one drawback to the scheme," said Pitou; "we haven't any attic. It must be something in the air—all the landlords seem to have the same complaint."

"But if you decide in the bench's favour, after all, you may pillow your curls on Miranda," put in Tricotrin. "She would be exhilarating company for him, Adolphe, hein? What do you think?" He murmured aside, "Give him a dig in the ribs and say, 'You silly ass, *I* can fix you up all right!' That's the way we issue invitations in Montmartre."

The clerk's countenance was livid; his tongue stuck to his front teeth. At last, wrenching the words out, he groaned, "If monsieur Goujaud will accept my hospitality, I shall be charmed!" He was not without a hope that his frigid bearing would beget a refusal.

"Ah, my dear old chap!" shouted Goujaud without an instant's hesitation, "consider it done!" And now there were to be three suppers, three beds, and three little breakfasts distorting the account!

Petitpas sipped his bock faintly, affecting not to notice that his guests' glasses had been emptied. With all his soul he repented the impulse that had led to his predicament. Amid the throes of his mental arithmetic he recognised that he had been deceived in himself, that he had no abiding passion for bohemia. How much more pleasing than to board and lodge this disreputable collection would have been the daily round of amusements that he had planned! Even now—he caught his breath—even now it was not too late; he might pay for the drinks and escape! Why shouldn't he run away?

"Gentlemen," cried Petitpas, "I shall go and fetch a cab for us all. Make yourselves comfortable till I come back!"

When the café closed, messieurs Tricotrin, Goujaud, and Pitou crept forlornly across the square and disposed themselves for slumber on the bench.

"Well, there is this to be said," yawned the poet, "if the little bounder had kept his word, it would have been an extraordinary conclusion to our adventures—as persons of literary discretion, we can hardly regret that a story did not end so improbably. . . . My children, Miranda, good-night—and a Merry Christmas!"

# THE CAFÉ OF THE BROKEN HEART

On the last day of the year, towards the dinner-hour, a young and attractive woman, whose costume proclaimed her a widow, entered the Café of the Broken Heart. That modest restaurant is situated near the Cemetery of Montmartre. The lady, quoting from an announcement over the window, requested the proprietor to conduct her to the "Apartment reserved for Those Desirous of Weeping Alone."

The proprietor's shoulders became apologetic. "A thousand regrets, madame," he murmured; "the Weeping Alone apartment is at present occupied."

This visibly annoyed the customer.

"It is the second anniversary of my bereavement," she complained, "and already I have wept here twice. The woe of an habituée should find a welcome!"

Her reproof, still more her air of being well-to-do, had an effect on Brochat. He looked at his wife, and his wife said hesitatingly:

"Perhaps the young man would consent to

oblige madame if you asked him nicely. After all, he engaged the room for seven o'clock, and it is not yet half-past six."

"That is true," said Brochat. "Alors, I shall see what can be arranged! I beg that madame will put herself to the trouble of sitting down while I make the biggest endeavours."

But he returned after a few minutes to declare that the young man's sorrow was so profound that no reply could be extracted from him.

The lady showed signs of temper. "Has this person the monopoly of sorrowing on your premises?" she demanded. "Whom does he lament? Surely the loss of a husband should give me the prior claim?"

"I cannot rightly say whom the gentleman laments," stammered Brochat; "the circumstances are, in fact, somewhat unusual. I would mention, however, that the apartment is a spacious one, as madame doubtless recalls, and no further mourners are expected for half an hour. If in the meantime madame would be so amiable as to weep in the young man's presence, I can assure her that she would find him too stricken to stare."

The widow considered. "Well," she said, after the pause, "if you can guarantee his abstraction, so be it! It is a matter of conscience with me to behave in precisely the same way each year, and, rather than miss my meditations there altogether, I am willing to make the best of him."

Brochat, having taken her order for refreshments—for which he always charged slightly higher prices on the first floor—preceded her up the stairs. The single gas-flame that had been kindled in the room was very low, and the lady received but a momentary impression of a man's figure bowed over a white table. She chose a chair at once with her back towards him, and resting her brow on her forefinger, disposed herself for desolation.

It may have been that the stranger's proximity told on her nerves, or it may have been that Time had done something to heal the wound. Whatever the cause, the frame of mind that she invited was slow in arriving, and when the bouillon and biscottes appeared she was not averse from trifling with them. Meanwhile, for any sound that he had made, the young man might have been as defunct as Henri IV; but as she took her second sip, a groan of such violence escaped him that she nearly upset her cup.

His abandonment of despair seemed to reflect upon her own insensibility; and, partly to raise herself in his esteem, the lady a moment later uttered a long-drawn, wistful sigh. No sooner had she done so, however, than she deeply regretted the indiscretion, for it stimulated the young man to a howl positively harrowing.

An impatient movement of her graceful shoulders protested against these demonstrations, but as she had her back to him, she could not tell whether he observed her. Stealing a glance, she discovered that his face was buried in his hands, and that the white table seemed to be laid for ten covers. Scrutiny revealed ten bottles of wine around it, the neck of each bottle embellished with a large crape bow. Curiosity now held the lady wide-eyed, and, as luck would have it, the young man, at this moment, raised his head.

"I trust that my agony does not disturb you, madame?" he inquired, meeting her gaze with some embarrassment.

"I must confess, monsieur," said she, "that you have been carrying it rather far."

He accepted the rebuke humbly. "If you divined the intensity of my sufferings, you would be lenient," he murmured. "Nevertheless, it was dishonest of me to moan so bitterly before seven o'clock, when my claim to the room legally begins. I entreat your pardon."

"It is accorded freely," said the lady, mollified by his penitence. "She would be a poor mourner who quarrelled with the affliction of another." Again she indulged in a plaintive sigh, and this time the young man's response was tactfully harmonious.

"Life is a vale of tears, madame," he remarked, with more solicitude than originality.

"You may indeed say so, monsieur," she assented. "To have lost one who was beloved——"

"It must be a heavy blow; I can imagine it!"

He had made a curious answer. She stared at him, perplexed.

"You can 'imagine' it?"

"Very well."

"But you yourself have experienced such a loss, monsieur?" faltered the widow nervously. Had trouble unhinged his brain?

"No," said the young man; "to speak by the clock, my own loss has not yet occurred."

A brief silence fell, during which she cast uneasy glances towards the door.

He added, as if anxious that she should do him justice: "But I would not have you consider my lamentations premature."

"How true it is," breathed the lady, "that in this world no human soul can wholly comprehend another!"

"Mine is a very painful history," he warned her, taking the hint; "yet if it will serve to divert your mind from your own misfortune, I shall be honoured to confide it to you. Stay, the tenth invitation, which an accident prevented my dispatching, would explain the circumstances tersely; but I much fear that the room is too dark for you to decipher all the subtleties. Have I your permission to turn up the gas?"

"Do so, by all means, monsieur," said the lady graciously. And the light displayed to her, first, as personable a young man as she could have desired to see; second, an imposing card, which was inscribed as follows:

MONSIEUR ACHILLE FLAMANT, ARTIST,
Forewarns you of the
DEATH OF HIS CAREER.
The Interment will take place at the
Café of the Broken Heart
on December 31st.

*Valedictory*
*Victuals*
*7 p.m.*

*N.B.—A sympathetic costume*
*will be appreciated.*

"I would call your attention to the border of cypress, and to the tomb in the corner," said the young man, with melancholy pride. "You may also look favourably on the figure with the shovel, which, of course, depicts me in the act of burying my hopes. It is a symbolic touch that no hope is visible."

"It is a very artistic production altogether," said the widow, dissembling her astonishment. "So you are a painter, monsieur Flamant?"

"Again speaking by the clock, I am a painter," he concurred; "but at midnight I shall no longer be in a position to say so—in the morning I am pledged to the life commercial. You will not marvel at my misery when I inform you that the existence of Achille Flamant, the artist, will terminate in five hours and twenty odd minutes!"

"Well, I am commercial myself," she said. "I am madame Aurore, the Beauty Specialist, of the rue Baba. Do not think me wanting in the finer emotions, but I assure you that a lucrative establishment is not a calamity."

"Madame Aurore," demurred the painter, with a bow, "your own business is but a sister art. In your atelier, the saffron of a bad complexion blooms to the fairness of a rose, and the bunch of a lumpy figure is modelled to the grace of Galatea. With me it will be a different pair of shoes; I shall be condemned to perch on a stool in the office of a wine-merchant, and invoice vintages which my thirty francs a week will not allow me to drink. No comparison can be drawn between your lot and my little."

"Certainly I should not like to perch," she confessed.

"Would you rejoice at the thirty francs a week?"

"Well, and the thirty francs a week are also poignant. But you may rise, monsieur; who shall foretell the future? Once I had to make both ends meet with less to coax them than the salary you mention. Even when my poor husband was taken from me—heigho!" she raised a miniature handkerchief delicately to her eyes—"when I was left alone in the world, monsieur, my affairs were greatly involved—I had practically nothing but my resolve to succeed."

"And the witchery of your personal attractions, madame," said the painter politely.

"Ah!" A pensive smile rewarded him. "The business was still in its infancy, monsieur; yet to-day I have the smartest clientèle in Paris. I might remove to the rue de la Paix to-morrow if I pleased. But, I say, why should I do that? I say, why a reckless rental for the sake of a fashionable address, when the fashionable men and women come to me where I am?"

"You show profound judgment, madame," said Flamant. "Why, indeed!"

"And you, too, will show good judgment, I am convinced," continued madame Aurore, regarding him with approval. "You have an air of intellect. If your eyebrows were elongated a fraction towards the temples—an improvement that might be effected easily enough by regular use of my Persian Pomade—you would acquire the appearance of a born conqueror."

"Alas," sighed Flamant, "my finances forbid my profiting by the tip!"

"Monsieur, you wrong me," murmured the specialist reproachfully. "I was speaking with no professional intent. On the contrary, if you will permit me, I shall take joy in forwarding a pot to you gratis."

"Is it possible?" cried Flamant: "you would really do this for me? You feel for my sufferings so much?"

"Indeed, I regret that I cannot persuade you to reduce the sufferings," she replied. "But tell me why you have selected the vocation of a wine-merchant's clerk."

"Fate, not I, has determined my cul-de-sac in life," rejoined her companion. "It is like this: my father, who lacks an artistic soul, consented to my becoming a painter only upon the understanding that I should gain the Prix de Rome and pursue my studies in Italy free of any expense to him. This being arranged, he agreed to make me a minute allowance in the meanwhile. By a concatenation of catastrophes upon which it is unnecessary to dwell, the Beaux-Arts did not accord the prize to me; and, at the end of last year, my parent reminded me of our compact, with a vigour which nothing but the relationship prevents my describing as 'inhuman.' He insisted that I must bid farewell to aspiration and renounce the brush of an artist for the quill of a clerk! Distraught, I flung myself upon my knees. I implored him to reconsider. My tribulation would have moved a rock—it even moved his heart!"

"He showed you mercy?"

"He allowed me a respite."

"It was for twelve months?"

"Precisely. What rapid intuitions you have! —if I could remain in Paris, we should become great friends. He allowed me twelve months' respite. If, at the end of that time, Art was still inadequate to supply my board and lodging, it was covenanted that, without any more ado, I should resign myself to clerical employment at Nantes. The merchant there is a friend of the family, and had offered to demonstrate his friendship by paying me too little to live on. Enfin, Fame has continued coy. The year expires to-night. I have begged a few comrades to attend a valedictory dinner—and at the stroke of midnight, despairing I depart!"

"Is there a train?"

"I do not depart from Paris till after breakfast to-morrow; but at midnight I depart from myself, I depart psychologically—the Achille Flamant of the Hitherto will be no more."

"I understand," said madame Aurore, moved. "As you say, in my own way I am an artist too, there is a bond between us. Poor fellow, it is indeed a crisis in your life! . . . Who put the crape bows on the bottles? they are badly tied. Shall I tie them properly for you?"

"It would be a sweet service," said Flamant, "and I should be grateful. How gentle you are to me—pomade, bows, nothing is too much for you!"

"You must give me your Nantes address," she said, "and I will post the pot without fail."

"I shall always keep it," he vowed—"not the pomade, but the pot—as a souvenir. Will you write a few lines to me at the same time?"

Her gaze was averted; she toyed with her spoon. "The directions will be on the label," she said timidly.

"It was not of my eyebrows I was thinking," murmured the man.

"What should I say? The latest quotation for artificial lashes, or a development in dimple culture, would hardly be engrossing to you."

"I am inclined to believe that anything that concerned you would engross me."

"It would be so unconventional," she objected dreamily.

"To send a brief message of encouragement? Have we not talked like confidants?"

"That is queerer still."

"I admit it. Just now I was unaware of your existence, and suddenly you dominate my thoughts. How do you work these miracles, madame? Do you know that I have an enormous favour to crave of you?"

"What, another one?"

"Actually! Is it not audacious of me? Yet for a man on the verge of parting from his identity, I venture to hope that you will strain a point."

"The circumstances are in the man's favour," she owned. "Nevertheless, much depends on what the point is."

"Well, I ask nothing less than that you accept the invitation on the card that you examined; I beg you to soothe my last hours by remaining to dine."

"Oh, but really," she exclaimed. "I am afraid——"

"You cannot urge that you are required at your atelier so late. And as to any social engagement, I do not hesitate to affirm that my approaching death in life puts forth the stronger claim."

"On me? When all is said, a new acquaintance!"

"What is Time?" demanded the painter. And she was not prepared with a reply.

"Your comrades will be strangers to me," she argued.

"It is a fact that now I wish they were not coming," acknowledged the host; "but they are young men of the loftiest genius, and some day it may provide a piquant anecdote to relate how you met them all in the period of their obscurity."

"My friend," she said, hurt, "if I consented, it would not be to garner anecdotes."

"Ah, a million regrets!" he cried; "I spoke foolishly."

"It was tactless."

"Yes—I am a man. Do you forgive?"

"Yes—I am a woman. Well, I must take my bonnet off!"

"Oh, you are not a woman, but an angel! What beautiful hair you have! And your hands, how I should love to paint them!"

"I have painted them, myself—with many preparations. My hands have known labour, believe me; they have washed up plates and dishes, and often the dishes had provided little to eat."

"Poor girl! One would never suspect that you had struggled like that."

"How feelingly you say it! There have been few to show me sympathy. Oh, I assure you, my life has been a hard one; it is a hard one now, in spite of my success. Constantly, when customers moan before my mirrors, I envy them, if they did but know it. I think: 'Yes, you have a double chin, and your eyes have lost their fire, and nasty curly little veins are spoiling the pallor of your nose; but you have the affection of husband and child, while *I* have nothing but fees.' What is my destiny? To hear great-grandmothers grumble because I cannot give them back their girlhood for a thousand francs! To devote myself to making other women beloved, while *I* remain loveless in my shop!"

"Honestly, my heart aches for you. If I might presume to advise, I would say, 'Do not allow the business to absorb your youth—you were meant to be worshipped.' And yet, while I recommend it, I hate to think of another man worshipping you."

"Why should you care, my dear? But there is no likelihood of that; I am far too busy to seek worshippers. A propos an idea has just occurred to me which might be advantageous to us both. If you could inform your father that you would be able to earn rather more next year by remaining in Paris than by going to Nantes, would it be satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory?" ejaculated Flamant. "It would be ecstatic! But how shall I acquire such information?"

"Would you like to paint a couple of portraits of me?"

"I should like to paint a thousand."

"My establishment is not a picture-gallery. Listen. I offer you a commission for two portraits: one, present day, let us say, moderately attractive——"

"I decline to libel you."

"O, flatterer! The other, depicting my faded aspect before I discovered the priceless secrets of the treatment that I practise in the rue Baba. I shall hang them both in the reception-room. I must look at least a decade older in the 'Before' than in the 'After,' and it must, of course, present the appearance of having been painted some years ago. That can be faked?"

"Perfectly."

"You accept?"

"I embrace your feet. You have saved my life; you have preserved my hopefulness, you have restored my youth!"

"It is my profession to preserve and restore."

"Ah, mon Dieu!" gasped Flamant in a paroxysm of adoration. "Aurore, I can no longer refrain from avowing that——"

At this instant the door opened, and there entered solemnly nine young men, garbed in such habiliments of woe as had never before been seen perambulating, even on the figures of undertakers. The foremost bore a wreath of immortelles, which he laid in devout silence on the dinner-table.

"Permit me," said Flamant, recovering himself by a stupendous effort: "monsieur Tricotrin, the poet—madame Aurore."

"Enchanted!" said the poet, in lugubrious tones. "I have a heavy cold, thank you, owing to my having passed the early hours of Christmas Day on a bench, in default of a bed. It is superfluous to inquire as to the health of madame."

"Monsieur Goujaud, a colleague."

"Overjoyed!" responded Goujaud, with a violent sneeze.

"Goujaud was with me," said Tricotrin.

"Monsieur Pitou, the composer."

"I ab hodoured. I trust badabe is dot dervous of gerbs? There is dothidg to fear," said Pitou.

"So was Pitou!" added Tricotrin.

"Monsieur Sanquereau, the sculptor; monsieur Lajeunie, the novelist," continued the host. But before he could present the rest of the company, Brochat was respectfully intimating to the widow that her position in the Weeping Alone apartment was now untenable. He was immediately commanded to lay another cover.

"Madame and comrades," declaimed Tricotrin, unrolling a voluminous manuscript, as they took their seats around the pot-au-feu, "I have composed for this piteous occasion a brief poem!"

"I must beseech your pardon," stammered Flamant, rising in deep confusion; "I have nine apologies to tender. Gentlemen, this touching wreath for the tomb of my career finds the tomb unready. These affecting garments which you have hired at, I fear, ruinous expense, should be exchanged for bunting; that immortal poem with which our friend would favour us has been suddenly deprived of all its point."

"Explain! explain!" volleyed from nine throats.

"I shall still read it," insisted Tricotrin, "it is good."

"The lady—nay, the goddess—whom you behold, has showered commissions, and for one year more I shall still be in your midst. Brothers in art, brothers in heart, I ask you to charge your glasses, and let your voices ring. The toast is, 'Madame Aurore and her gift of the New Year!'"

"Madame Aurore and her gift of the New Year!" shrieked the nine young men, springing to their feet.

"In a year much may happen," said the lady tremulously.

And when they had all sat down again, Flamant was thrilled to find her hand in his beneath the table.

# THE DRESS CLOTHES OF MONSIEUR POMPONNET

It was thanks to Touquet that she was able to look so chic—the little baggage !—yet of all her suitors Touquet was the one she favoured least. He was the costumier at the corner of the rue des Martyrs, and made a very fair thing of the second-hand clothes. It was to Touquet's that the tradesmen of the quarter turned as a matter of course to hire dress-suits for their nuptials; it was in the well-cleaned satins of Touquet that the brides' mothers and the lady guests cut such imposing figures when they were photographed after the wedding breakfasts; it was even Touquet who sometimes supplied a gown to one or another of the humble actresses at the Théâtre Montmartre, and received a couple of free tickets in addition to his fee. I tell you that Touquet was not a person to be sneezed at, though he had passed the first flush of youth, and was never an Adonis.

Besides, who was she, this little Lisette, who had the impudence to flout him? A girl in a florist's, if you can believe me, with no particular beauty herself, and not a sou by way of dot! And yet—one must confess it—she turned a head as swiftly as she made a "buttonhole"; and Pomponnet, the pastrycook, was paying court to her, too—to say nothing of the homage of messieurs Tricotrin, the poet, and Goujaud, the painter, and Lajeunie, the novelist. You would never have guessed that her wages were only twenty francs a week, as you watched her waltz with Tricotrin at the ball on Saturday evening, or as you saw her enter Pomponnet's shop, when the shutters were drawn, to feast on his strawberry tarts. Her costumes were the cynosure of the boulevard Rochechouart!

And they were all due to Touquet, Touquet the infatuated, who lent the fine feathers to her for the sake of a glance, or a pressure of the hand—and wept on his counter afterwards while he wondered whose arms might be embracing her in the costumes that he had cleaned and pressed with so much care. Often he swore that his folly should end—that she should be affianced to him, or go shabby; but, lo! in a day or two she would make her appearance again, to coax for the loan of a smart blouse, or "that hat with the giant rose and the ostrich plume"—and Touquet would be as weak as ever.

Judge, then, of his despair when he heard that she had agreed to marry Pomponnet! She told him the news with the air of an amiable gossip when she came to return a ball-dress that she had borrowed.

"Enfin," she said—perched on the counter, and swinging her remorseless feet—"it is arranged; I desert the flowers for the pastry, and become the mistress of a shop. I shall have to beg from my good friend monsieur Touquet no more—not at all! I shall be his client, like the rest. It will be better, hein?"

Touquet groaned. "You know well, Lisette," he answered, "that it has been a joy to me to place the stock at your disposal, even though it was to make you more attractive in the eyes of other men. Everything here that you have worn possesses a charm to me. I fondle the garments when you bring them back; I take them down from the pegs and dream over them. Truly! There is no limit to my weakness, for often when a client proposes to hire a frock that you have had, I cannot bear that she should profane it, and I say that it is engaged."

"You dear, kind monsieur Touquet," murmured the coquette; "how agreeable you are!"

"I have always hoped for the day when the stock would be all your own, Lisette. And by-and-by we might have removed to a better position—even down the hill. Who knows? We might have opened a business in the Madeleine quarter. That would suit you better than a little cake-shop up a side street? And I would have risked it for you—I know how you incline to fashion. When I have taken you to a theatre, did you choose the Montmartre—where we might have gone for nothing—or the Moncey? Not you!—that might do for other girls. *You* have always demanded the theatres of the Grand Boulevard; a cup of coffee at the Café de la Paix is more to your taste than a bottle of beer and hard-boiled eggs at The Nimble Rabbit. Heaven knows I trust you will be happy, but I cannot persuade myself that this Pomponnet shares your ambitions; with his slum and his stale pastry he is quite content."

"It is not stale," she said.

"Well, we will pass his pastry—though, word of honour, I bought some there last week that might have been baked before the Commune; but to recur to his soul, is it an affinity?"

"Affinities are always hard up," she pouted.

"Zut!" exclaimed Touquet; "now your mind is running on that monsieur Tricotrin—by 'affinities' I do not mean hungry poets. Why not have entrusted your happiness to *me?* I adore you, I have told you a thousand times that I adore you. Lisette, consider before it is too late! You cannot love this—this obscure baker?"

She gave a shrug. "It is a fact that devotion has not robbed me of my appetite," she confessed. "But what would you have? His business goes far better than you imagine—I have seen his books; and anyhow, my sentiment for you is friendship, and no more."

"To the devil with friendship!" cried the unhappy wardrobe-dealer; "did I dress you like the Empress Joséphine for friendship?"

"Do not mock yourself of it," she said reprovingly; "remember that 'Friendship is a beautiful flower, of which esteem is the stem.'" And, having thrown the adage to him, coupled with a glance that drove him to distraction, the little flirt jumped off the counter and was gone.

Much more reluctantly she contemplated parting with him whom the costumier had described as a "hungry poet"; but matrimony did not enter the poet's scheme of things, nor for that matter had she ever regarded him as a possible parti. Yet a woman may give her fancy where her reason refuses to follow, and when she imparted her news to Tricotrin there was no smile on her lips.

"We shall not go to balls any more, old dear," she said. "Monsieur Pomponnet has proposed marriage to me—and I settle down."

"Heartless girl," exclaimed the young man, with tears in his eyes. "So much for woman's constancy!"

"Mon Dieu," she faltered, "did you then love me, Gustave—really?"

"I do not know," said Tricotrin, "but since I am to lose you, I prefer to think so. Ah, do not grieve for me—fortunately, there is always the Seine! And first I shall pour my misery into song; and in years to come, fair daughters at your side will read the deathless poem, little dreaming that the Lisette I sang to is their mother. Some time—long after I am in my grave, when France has honoured me at last—you may stand before a statue that bears my name, and think, 'He loved me, and I broke his heart!'"

"Oh," she whimpered, "rather than break your heart I—I might break the engagement! I might consider again, Gustave."

"No, no," returned Tricotrin, "I will not reproach myself with the thought that I have marred your life; I will leave you free. Besides, as I say, I am not certain that I should want you so much but for the fact that I have lost you. After all, you will not appreciate the poem that immortalises you, and if I lived, many of your remarks about it would doubtless infuriate me."

"Why shall I not appreciate it? Am I so stupid?"

"It is not that you are stupid, my Soul," he explained; "it is that I am transcendentally clever. To understand the virtues of my work one must have sipped from all the flowers of Literature. 'There is to be found in it Racine, Voltaire, Flaubert, Renan—and always Gustave

Tricotrin,' as Lemaître has written. He wrote, '—and always Anatole France,' but I paraphrase him slightly. So you are going to marry Pomponnet? Mon Dieu, when I have any sous in my pocket, I will ruin myself, for the rapture of regretting you among the pastry!"

"I thought," she said, a little mortified, "that you were going to drown yourself?"

"Am I not to write my Lament to you? I must eat while I write it—why not pastry? Also, when I am penniless and starving, you may sometimes, in your prosperity—— And yet, perhaps, it is too much to ask?"

"Give you tick, do you mean, dear? But yes, Gustave; how can you doubt that I will do that? In memory of——"

"In memory of the love that has been, you will allow me to run up a small score for cakes, will you not, Lisette?"

"I will, indeed!" she promised. "But, but—— Oh, it's quite true, I should never understand you! A minute ago you made me think of you in the Morgue, and now you make me think of you in the cake-shop. What are you laughing at?"

"I laugh, like Figaro," said Tricotrin, "that I may not be obliged to weep. When are you going to throw yourself away, my little Lisette? Has my accursed rival induced you to fix a date?"

"We are to be married in a fortnight's time," she said. "And if you could undertake to be sensible, I would ask Alphonse to invite you to the breakfast."

"In a fortnight's time hunger and a hopeless passion will probably have made an end of me," replied the poet; "however, if I survive, the breakfast will certainly be welcome. Where is it to be held? I can recommend a restaurant that is especially fine at such affairs, and most moderate. 'Photographs of the party are taken gratuitously in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, and pianos are at the disposal of the ladies'; I quote from the menu—I study it in the window every time I pass. There are wedding breakfasts from six to twelve francs per head. At six francs, the party have their choice of two soups and three hors d'œuvres. Then comes 'poisson'—I fear it may be whiting—filet de bœuf with tomates farcies, bouchées à la Reine, chicken, pigeons, salad, two vegetables, an ice, assorted fruits, and biscuits. The wines are madeira, a bottle of mâcon to each person, a bottle of bordeaux among four persons, and a bottle of champagne among ten persons. Also coffee and liqueurs. At six francs a head! It is good, hein? At seven francs there is a bottle of champagne among every eight persons—Pomponnet will, of course, do as he thinks best. At eight francs, a bottle is provided for every six persons. I have too much delicacy to make suggestions, but should he be willing to soar to twelve francs a head, I might eat enough to last a week—and of such quality! The soups would then be bisque d'écrevisse and consommé Rachel. Rissoles de foies gras would appear. Asparagus 'in branches,' and compote of peaches flavoured with maraschino would be included. Also, in the twelve-franc breakfast, the champagne begins to have a human name on the label!"

Now, it is not certain how much of this information Lisette repeated to Pomponnet, but Pomponnet, having a will of his own, refused to entertain monsieur Tricotrin at any price at all. Moreover, he found it unconventional that she should desire the poet's company, considering the attentions that he had paid her; and she was forced to listen, with an air of humility which she was far from feeling, to a lecture on the responsibilities of her new position.

"I am not a jealous man," said the pastry-cook, who was as jealous a man as ever baked a pie, "but it would be discreet that you dropped this acquaintance now that we are engaged. I know well that you have never taken the addresses of such a fellow seriously, and that it is only in the goodness of your heart you wish to present him with a blow-out. Nevertheless, the betrothal of a man in my circumstances is much remarked; all the daughters of the hairdresser next door have had their hopes of me—indeed, there is scarcely a neighbour who is not chagrined at the turn events have taken—and the world would be only too glad of an excuse to call me 'fool.' Pomponnet's wife must be above suspicion. You will remember that a little lightness of conduct which might be forgiven in the employée of the florist would be unseemly in my fiancée. No more conversation with monsieur Tricotrin, Lisette! Some dignity—some coldness in the bow when you pass him. The boulevard will observe it, it will be approved."

"You, of course, know best, my dear Alphonse," she returned meekly; "I am only an inexperienced girl, and I am thankful to have your advice to guide me. But let me say that never, never has there been any 'lightness of conduct,' to distress you. Monsieur Tricotrin and I have been merely friends. If I have gone to a ball with him sometimes—and I acknowledge that has happened—it has been because nobody more to my taste has offered to take me." She had ground her little teeth under the infliction of his homily, and it was only by dint of thinking hard of his profits that she abstained from retorting that he might marry all the daughters of the hairdresser and go to Uganda.

However, during the next week or so, she did not chance to meet the poet on the boulevard; and since she wished to conquer her tenderness for him, one cannot doubt that all would have been well but for the Editor of *L'Echo de la Butte*. By a freak of fate, the Editor of *L'Echo de la Butte* was moved to invite monsieur Tricotrin to an affair of ceremony two days previous to the wedding. What followed? Naturally Tricotrin must present himself in evening dress. Naturally, also, he must go to Touquet's to hire the suit.

"Regard," said the costumier, "here is a suit that I have just acquired. Monsieur will observe that it is of the most distinguished cut—quite in the latest fashion. I will whisper to monsieur that it comes to me through the valet of the Comte de St.-Nom-la-Bretèche-Forêt-de-Marly."

"Mon Dieu!" said Tricotrin, "let me try it on!" And he was so gratified by his appearance in it that he barely winced at the thought of the expense. "I am improving my position," he soliloquised; "if I have not precisely inherited the mantle of Victor Hugo, I have, at any rate, hired the dress-suit of the Comte de St.-Nom-la-Bretèche-Forêt-de-Marly!"

Never had a more impressive spectacle been witnessed in Montmartre than Tricotrin's departure from his latest lodging shortly after six o'clock. Wearing a shirt of Pitou's, Flamant's patent-leather boots, and a white tie contributed by Goujaud, the young man sallied forth with the deportment of the Count himself. Only one thing more did he desire, a flower for his buttonhole—and Lisette remained in her situation until the morrow! What more natural, finally, than that he should hie him to the florist's?

It was the first time that she had seen her lover in evening dress, and sentiment overpowered her as he entered.

"Thou!" she murmured, paling.

On the poet, too, the influence of the clothes was very strong; attired like a jeune premier, he craved with all the dramatic instinct of his nature for a love scene; and, instead of fulfilling his intention to beg for a rosebud at cost price, he gazed at her soulfully and breathed "Lisette!"

"So we have met again!" she said.

"The world is small," returned the poet, ignoring the fact that he had come to the shop. "And am I yet remembered?"

"It is not likely I should forget you in a few days," she said, more practically; "I didn't forget about the breakfast, either, but Alphonse put his foot down."

"Pig!" said the poet. "And yet it may be better so! How could I eat in such an hour?"

"However, you are not disconsolate this evening?" she suggested. "Mais vrai! what a swell you are!"

"Flûte! some fashionable assembly that will bore me beyond endurance," he sighed. "With you alone, Lisette, have I known true happiness—

the tram rides on summer nights that were joyous because we loved; the simple meals that were sweetened by your smile!"

"Ah, Gustave!" she said. "Wait, I must give you a flower for your coat!"

"I shall keep it all my life!" vowed Tricotrin. "Tell me, little one—I dare not stay now, because my host lives a long way off—but this evening, could you not meet me once again? For the last time, to say farewell? I have nearly two francs fifty, and we might go to supper, if you agree."

It was arranged before he took leave of her that she should meet him outside the *débit* at the corner of the rue de Sontay at eleven o'clock, and sup with him there, in a locality where she was unlikely to be recognised. Rash enough, this conduct, for a young woman who was to be married to another man on the next day but one! But a greater imprudence was to follow. They supped, they sentimentalised, and when they parted in the Champs Elysées and the moonshine, she gave him from her bosom a little rose-coloured envelope that contained nothing less than a lock of her hair.

The poet placed it tenderly in his waistcoat pocket; and, after he had wept, and quoted poetry to the stars, forgot it. He began to wish that he had not mixed his liquors quite so impartially; and, on the morrow, when he woke, he was mindful of nothing more grievous than a splitting headache.

Now Touquet, who could not sleep of nights because the pastrycook was going to marry Lisette, made a practice of examining the pockets of all garments returned to him, with an eye to stray sous; and when he proceeded to examine the pockets of the dress-suit returned by monsieur Tricotrin, what befell but that he drew forth a rose-tinted envelope containing a tress of hair, and inscribed, "To Gustave, from Lisette. Adieu."

And the Editor who invited monsieur Tricotrin had never heard of Lisette; never heard of Pomponnet; did not know that such a person as Touquet existed; yet the editorial caprice had manipulated destinies. How powerful are Editors! How complicated is life!

But a truce to philosophy—let us deal with the emotions of the soul! The shop reeled before Touquet. All the good and the bad in his character battled tumultuously. In one moment he aspired to be generous and restore to Lisette the evidence of her guilt; in the next he sank to the base thought of displaying it to Pomponnet and breaking off the match. The discovery fired his brain. No longer was he a nonentity, the odd man out—chance had transformed him to the master of the situation. Full well he knew that there would be no nuptials next day were

Pomponnet aware of his fiancée's perfidy; it needed but to go to him and say, "Monsieur, my sense of duty compels me to inform you——" How easy it would be! He laughed hysterically.

But Lisette would never pardon such a meanness—she would always despise and hate him! He would have torn her from his rival's arms, it was true, yet his own would still be empty. "Ah, Lisette, Lisette!" groaned the wretched man; and, swept to evil by the force of passion, he cudgelled his mind to devise some piece of trickery, some diabolical artifice, by which the incriminating token might be placed in the pastrycook's hands as if by accident.

And while he pondered—his "whole soul a chaos"—in that hour Pomponnet entered to hire a dress-suit for his wedding!

Touquet raised his head, blanched to the lips.

"Regard," he said, with a forced calm terrible to behold; "here is a suit that I have just acquired. Monsieur will observe that it is of the most distinguished cut—quite in the latest fashion. I will whisper to monsieur that it comes to me through the valet of the Comte de St.-Nom-la-Bretèche-Forêt-de-Marly." And, unseen by the guileless bridegroom, he slipped the damning proof into a pocket of the trousers, where his knowledge of the pastrycook's attitudes assured him that it was even more certain to be found than in the waistcoat.

"Mon Dieu!" said the other, duly impressed by the suit's pedigree; "let me try it on. . . . The coat is rather tight," he complained, "but it has undeniably an air."

"No more than one client has worn it," gasped the wardrobe dealer haggardly: "*monsieur Gustave Tricotrin, the poet, who hired it last night!* The suit is practically new; I have no other in the establishment to compare with it. Listen, monsieur Pomponnet! To an old client like yourself, I will be liberal; wear it this evening for an hour in your home—if you find it not to your figure, there will be time to make another selection before the ceremony to-morrow. You shall have this on trial, I will make no extra charge."

Such munificence was bound to have its effect, and five minutes later Touquet's plot had progressed. But the tension had been frightful; the door had scarcely closed when he sank into a chair, trembling in every limb, and for the rest of the day he attended to his business like one moving in a trance.

Meanwhile, the unsuspecting Pomponnet reviewed the arrangement with considerable satisfaction; and when he came to attire himself, after the cake-shop was shut, his reflected image pleased him so well that he was tempted to stroll abroad. He decided to call on his betrothed, and to exhibit himself a little on the boulevard.

Accordingly, he put some money in the pocket of the waistcoat, oiled his silk hat, to give it an additional lustre, and sallied forth in high good-humour.

"How splendid you look, my dear Alphonse!" exclaimed Lisette, little dreaming it was the same suit that she had approved on Tricotrin the previous evening.

Her innocent admiration was agreeable to Pomponnet; he patted her on the cheek.

"In truth," he said carelessly, "I had forgotten that I had it on! But I was so impatient for to-morrow, my pet angel, that I could not remain alone and I had to come to see you."

They were talking on her doorstep, for she had no apartment in which it would have been *convenable* to entertain him, and it appeared to him that the terrace of a café would be more congenial.

"Run upstairs and make your toilette, my loving duck," he suggested, "and I shall take you out for a tasse. While you are getting ready, I will smoke a cigar." And he drew his cigar-case from the breast-pocket of the coat, and took a match-box from the pocket where he had put his cash.

It was a balmy evening, sweet with the odour of spring, and the streets were full of life. As he promenaded with her on the boulevard, Pomponnet did not fail to remark the attention commanded by his costume. He strutted proudly, and when they reached the café and took their seats, he gave his order with the authority of the President.

"Ah!" he remarked, "it is good here, hein?" And then, stretching his legs, he thrust both his hands into the pockets of his trousers. "*Comment?*" he murmured. "What have I found? . . . Now is not this amusing—I swear it is a billet-doux!" He bent, chuckling, to the light—and bounded in his chair with an oath that turned a dozen heads towards them. "Traitress," roared Pomponnet, "miserable traitress! It is *your* name! It is your *writing!* It is your *hair!* Do not deny it; give me your head—it matches to a shade! Jezebel, last night you met monsieur Tricotrin—you have deceived me!"

Lisette, who had jumped as high as he in recognising the envelope, sat like one paralysed now. Her tongue refused to move. For an instant, the catastrophe seemed to her of supernatural agency—it was as if a miracle had happened, as she saw her fiancé produce her lover's keepsake. All she could stammer at last was:

"Let us go away—pay for the coffee!"

"I will not pay," shouted monsieur Pomponnet. "Pay for it yourself, jade—I have done with you!" And, leaving her spellbound at the table, he strode from the terrace like a madman before the waiters could stop him.

Oh, of course, he was well known at the café, and they did not detain Lisette, but it was a most ignominious position for a young woman. And there was no wedding next day, and everybody knew why. The little coquette, who had mocked suitors by the dozen, was jilted almost on the threshold of the Mairie. She smacked Tricotrin's face in the morning, but her humiliation was so acute that it demanded the salve of immediate marriage; and at the moment she could think of no one better than Touquet.

So Touquet won her after all. And though by this time she may guess how he accomplished it, he will tell you—word of honour !—that never, never has he had occasion for regret.

# THE SUICIDES IN THE RUE SOMBRE

Having bought the rope, Tournicquot wondered where he should hang himself. The lath-and-plaster ceiling of his room might decline to support him, and while the streets were populous a lamp-post was out of the question. As he hesitated on the kerb, he reflected that a pan of charcoal would have been more convenient after all; but the coil of rope in the doorway of a shop had lured his fancy, and now it would be laughable to throw it away.

Tournicquot was much averse from being laughed at in private life—perhaps because Fate had willed that he should be laughed at so much in his public capacity. Could he have had his way, indeed, Tournicquot would have been a great tragedian, instead of a little droll, whose portraits, with a bright red nose and a scarlet wig, grimaced on the hoardings; and he resolved that, at any rate, the element of humour should not mar his suicide.

As to the motive for his death, it was as romantic as his heart desired. He adored "La

Belle Lucrèce," the fascinating Snake Charmer, and somewhere in the background the artiste had a husband. Little the audience suspected the passion that devoured their grotesque comedian while he cut his capers and turned love to ridicule; little they divined the pathos of a situation which condemned him behind the scenes to whisper the most sentimental assurances of devotion when disfigured by a flaming wig and a nose that was daubed vermilion! How nearly it has been said, One half of the world does not know how the other half loves!

But such incongruities would distress Tournicquot no more—to-day he was to die; he had worn his chessboard trousers and his little green coat for the last time! For the last time had the relentless virtue of Lucrèce driven him to despair! When he was discovered inanimate, hanging to a beam, nothing comic about him, perhaps the world would admit that his soul had been solemn, though his "line of business" had been funny; perhaps Lucrèce would even drop warm tears on his tomb!

It was early in the evening. Dusk was gathering over Paris, the promise of dinner was in the breeze. The white glare of electric globes began to flood the streets; and before the cafés, waiters bustled among the tables, bearing the vermouth and absinthe of the hour. Instinctively shunning the more frequented thoroughfares, Tournicquot crossed the boulevard des Batignolles, and wandered, lost in reverie, along the melancholy continuation of the rue de Rome until he perceived that he had reached a neighbourhood unknown to him—that he stood at the corner of a street which bore the name "Rue Sombre." Opposite, one of the houses was being rebuilt, and as he gazed at it—this skeleton of a home in which the workmen's hammers were silenced for the night—Tournicquot recognised that his journey was at an end. Here, he could not doubt that he would find the last, grim hospitality that he sought. The house had no door to bar his entrance, but—as if in omen—above the gap where a door had been, the sinister number "13" was still to be discerned. He cast a glance over his shoulder, and, grasping the rope with a firm hand, crept inside.

It was dark within, so dark that at first he could discern nothing but the gleam of bare walls. He stole along the passage, and, mounting a flight of steps, on which his feet sprung mournful echoes, proceeded stealthily towards an apartment on the first floor. At this point the darkness became impenetrable, for the *volets* had been closed, and in order to make his arrangements, it was necessary that he should have a light. He paused, fumbling in his pocket; and then, with his next step, blundered against a body, which swung from the contact, like a human being suspended in mid-air.

Tournicquot leapt backwards in terror. A cold sweat bespangled him, and for some seconds he shook so violently that he was unable to strike a match. At last, when he accomplished it, he beheld a man, apparently dead, hanging by a rope in the doorway.

"Ah, mon Dieu!" gasped Tournicquot. And the thudding of his heart seemed to resound through the deserted house.

Humanity impelled him to rescue the poor wretch, if it was still to be done. Shuddering, he whipped out his knife, and sawed at the cord desperately. The cord was stout, and the blade of the knife but small; an eternity seemed to pass while he sawed in the darkness. Presently one of the strands gave way. He set his teeth and pressed harder, and harder yet. Suddenly the rope yielded and the body fell to the ground. Tournicquot threw himself beside it, tearing open the collar, and using frantic efforts to restore animation. There was no result. He persevered, but the body lay perfectly inert. He began to reflect that it was his duty to inform the police of the discovery, and he asked himself how he should account for his presence on the scene. Just as he was considering this, he felt the stir of life. As if by a miracle the man groaned.

"Courage, my poor fellow!" panted Tournicquot. "Courage—all is well!"

The man groaned again; and after an appalling silence, during which Tournicquot began to tremble for his fate anew, asked feebly, "Where am I?"

"You would have hanged yourself," explained Tournicquot. "Thanks to Heaven, I arrived in time to save your life!"

In the darkness they could not see each other, but he felt for the man's hand and pressed it warmly. To his consternation, he received, for response, a thump in the chest.

"Morbleu, what an infernal cheek!" croaked the man. "So you have cut me down? You meddlesome idiot, by what right did you poke your nose into my affairs, hein?"

Dismay held Tournicquot dumb.

"Hein?" wheezed the man; "what concern was it of yours, if you please? Never in my life before have I met with such a piece of presumption!"

"My poor friend," stammered Tournicquot, "you do not know what you say—you are not yourself! By-and-by you will be grateful, you will fall on your knees and bless me."

"By-and-by I shall punch you in the eye," returned the man, "just as soon as I am feeling better! What have you done to my collar, too? I declare you have played the devil with me!"

His annoyance rose. "Who are you, and what are you doing here, anyhow? You are a trespasser—I shall give you in charge."

"Come, come," said Tournicquot, conciliatingly, "if your misfortunes are more than you can bear, I regret that I was obliged to save you; but, after all, there is no need to make such a grievance of it—you can hang yourself another day."

"And why should I be put to the trouble twice?" grumbled the other. "Do you figure yourself that it is agreeable to hang? I passed a very bad time, I can assure you. If you had experienced it, you would not talk so lightly about 'another day.' The more I think of your impudent interference, the more it vexes me. And how dark it is! Get up and light the candle—it gives me the hump here."

"I have no candle, I have no candle," babbled Tournicquot; "I do not carry candles in my pocket."

"There is a bit on the mantelpiece," replied the man angrily; "I saw it when I came in. Go and feel for it—hunt about! Do not keep me lying here in the dark—the least you can do is to make me as comfortable as you can."

Tournicquot, not a little perturbed by the threat of assault, groped obediently; but the room appeared to be of the dimensions of a park, and he arrived at the candle stump only after a prolonged excursion. The flame revealed to him a man of about his own age, who leant against the wall regarding him with indignant eyes. Revealed also was the coil of rope that the comedian had brought for his own use; and the man pointed to it.

" What is that? It was not here just now."

" It belongs to me," admitted Tournicquot, nervously.

" I see that it belongs to you. Why do you visit an empty house with a coil of rope, hein? I should like to understand that. . . . Upon my life, you were here on the same business as myself! Now if this does not pass all forbearance! You come to commit suicide, and yet you have the effrontery to put a stop to mine!"

" Well," exclaimed Tournicquot, " I obeyed an impulse of pity! It is true that I came to destroy myself, for I am the most miserable of men; but I was so much affected by the sight of your sufferings that temporarily I forgot my own."

" That is a lie, for I was not suffering—I was not conscious when you came in. However, you have some pretty moments in front of you, so we will say no more! When you feel yourself drop, it will be diabolical, I promise you; the hair stands erect on the head, and each spot of blood in the veins congeals to a separate icicle!

It is true that the drop itself is swift, but the clutch of the rope, as you kick in the air, is hardly less atrocious. Do not be encouraged by the delusion that the matter is instantaneous. Time mocks you, and a second holds the sensations of a quarter of an hour. What has forced you to it? We need not stand on ceremony with each other, hein?"

"I have resolved to die because life is torture," said Tournicquot, on whom these details had made an unfavourable impression.

"The same with me! A woman, of course?"

"Yes," sighed Tournicquot, "a woman!"

"Is there no other remedy? Cannot you desert her?"

"Desert her? I pine for her embrace!"

"Hein?"

"She will not have anything to do with me."

"*Comment?* Then it is love with you?"

"What else? An eternal passion!"

"Oh, mon Dieu, I took it for granted you were married! But this is droll. *You* would die because you cannot get hold of a woman, and *I* because I cannot get rid of one. We should talk, we two. Can you give me a cigarette?"

"With pleasure, monsieur," responded Tournicquot, producing a packet. "I, also, will take one—my last!"

"If I expressed myself hastily just now," said his companion, refastening his collar, "I shall apologise—no doubt your interference was well meant, though I do not pretend to approve it. Let us dismiss the incident; you have behaved tactlessly, and I, on my side, have perhaps resented your error with too much warmth. Well, it is finished! While the candle burns, let us exchange more amicable views. Is my cravat straight? It astonishes me to hear that love can drive a man to such despair. I, too, have loved, but never to the length of the rope. There are plenty of women in Paris—if one has no heart, there is always another. I am far from proposing to frustrate your project, holding as I do that a man's suicide is an intimate matter in which 'rescue' is a name given by busybodies to a gross impertinence; but as you have not begun the job, I will confess that I think you are being rash."

"I have considered," replied Tournicquot, "I have considered attentively. There is no alternative, I assure you."

"I would make another attempt to persuade the lady—I swear I would make another attempt! You are not a bad-looking fellow. What is her objection to you?"

"It is not that she objects to me—on the contrary. But she is a woman of high principle, and she has a husband who is devoted to her—she will not break his heart. It is like that."

"Young?"

"No more than thirty."

"And beautiful?"

"With a beauty like an angel's! She has a dimple in her right cheek when she smiles that drives one to distraction."

"Myself, I have no weakness for dimples; but every man to his taste—there is no arguing about these things. What a combination—young, lovely, virtuous! And I make you a bet the oaf of a husband does not appreciate her! Is it not always so? Now *I*—but of course I married foolishly, I married an artiste. If I had my time again I would choose in preference any sempstress. The artistes are for applause, for bouquets, for little dinners, but not for marriage."

"I cannot agree with you," said Tournicquot, with some hauteur. "Your experience may have been unfortunate, but the theatre contains women quite as noble as any other sphere. In proof of it, the lady I adore is an artiste herself!"

"Really—is it so? Would it be indiscreet to ask her name?"

"There are things that one does not tell."

"But as a matter of interest? There is nothing derogatory to her in what you say—quite the reverse."

"True! Well, the reason for reticence is removed. She is known as 'La Belle Lucrèce.'"

"*Hein?*" ejaculated the other, jumping.

"What ails you?"

"She is my wife!"

"Your wife? Impossible!"

"I tell you I am married to her—she is 'madame Béguinet.'"

"Mon Dieu!" faltered Tournicquot, aghast; "what have I done!"

"So? . . . You are her lover?"

"Never has she encouraged me—recall what I said! There are no grounds for jealousy—am I not about to die because she spurns me? I swear to you——"

"You mistake my emotion—why should I be jealous? Not at all—I am only amazed. She thinks I am devoted to her? Ho, ho! Not at all! You see my 'devotion' by the fact that I am about to hang myself rather than live with her. And *you*, you cannot bear to live because you adore her! Actually, you adore her! Is it not inexplicable? Oh, there is certainly the finger of Providence in this meeting! . . . Wait, we must discuss—we should come to each other's aid! . . . Give me another cigarette."

Some seconds passed while they smoked in silent meditation.

"Listen," resumed monsieur Béguinet; "in order to clear up this complication, a perfect candour is required on both sides. Alors, as to your views, is it that you aspire to marry madame? I do not wish to appear exigent, but in the position that I occupy you will realise that it is my duty to make the most favourable arrangements for her that I can. Now open your heart to me; speak frankly!"

"It is difficult for me to express myself without restraint to you, monsieur," said Tournicquot, "because circumstances cause me to regard you as a grievance. To answer you with all the delicacy possible, I will say that if I had cut you down five minutes later, life would be a fairer thing to me."

"Good," said monsieur Béguinet, "we make progress! Your income? Does it suffice to support her in the style to which she is accustomed? What may your occupation be?"

"I am in madame's own profession—I, too, am an artiste."

"So much the more congenial! I foresee a joyous union. Come, we go famously! Your line of business—snakes, ventriloquism, performing-rabbits, what is it?"

"My name is 'Tournicquot,'" responded the comedian, with dignity. "All is said!"

"A-ah! Is it so? Now I understand why your voice has been puzzling me! Monsieur Tournicquot, I am enchanted to make your acquaintance. I declare the matter arranges itself! I shall tell you what we will do. Hitherto I have had no choice between residing with madame and committing suicide, because my affairs have not prospered, and—though my pride has revolted—her salary has been essential for my maintenance. Now the happy medium jumps to the eyes; for you, for me, for her the bright sunshine streams! I shall efface myself; I shall go to a distant spot—say, Monte Carlo—and you shall make me a snug allowance. Have no misgiving; crown her with blossoms, lead her to the altar, and rest tranquil—I shall never reappear. Do not figure yourself that I shall enter like the villain at the Ambigu and menace the blissful home. Not at all! I myself may even re-marry, who knows? Indeed, should you offer me an allowance adequate for a family man, I will undertake to re-marry—I have always inclined towards speculation. That will shut my mouth, hein? I could threaten nothing, even if I had a base nature, for I, also, shall have committed bigamy. Suicide, bigamy, I would commit *anything* rather than live with Lucrèce!"

"But madame's consent must be gained," demurred Tournicquot; "you overlook the fact that madame must consent. It is a fact that I do not understand why she should have any consideration for you, but if she continues to harp upon her 'duty,' what then?"

"Do you not tell me that her only objection to your suit has been her fear that she would break my heart? What an hallucination! I shall approach the subject with tact, with the utmost delicacy. I shall intimate to her that to ensure her happiness I am willing to sacrifice myself. Should she hesitate, I shall demand to sacrifice myself! Rest assured that if she regards you with the favour that you believe, your troubles are at an end—the barrier removes itself, and you join hands. . . . The candle is going out! Shall we depart?"

"I perceive no reason why we should remain; in truth, we might have got out of it sooner."

"You are right! a café will be more cheerful. Suppose we take a bottle of wine together; how does it strike you? If you insist, I will be your guest; if not——"

"Ah, monsieur, you will allow me the pleasure," murmured Tournicquot.

"Well, well," said Béguinet, "you must have your way! . . . Your rope you have no use for, hein—we shall leave it?"

"But certainly! Why should I burden myself?"

"The occasion has passed, true. Good! Come, my comrade, let us descend!"

Who shall read the future? Awhile ago they had been strangers, neither intending to quit the house alive; now the pair issued from it jauntily, arm in arm. Both were in high spirits, and by the time the lamps of a café gave them welcome, and the wine gurgled gaily into the glasses, they pledged each other with a sentiment no less than fraternal.

"How I rejoice that I have met you!" exclaimed Béguinet. "To your marriage, mon vieux; to your joy! Fill up, again a glass!—there are plenty of bottles in the cellar. Mon Dieu, you are my preserver—I must embrace you. Never till now have I felt such affection for a man. This evening all was black to me; I despaired, my heart was as heavy as a cannon-ball—and suddenly the world is bright. Roses bloom before my feet, and the little larks are singing in the sky. I dance, I skip. How beautiful, how sublime is friendship!—better than riches, than youth, than the love of woman; riches melt, youth flies, woman snores. But friendship is—— Again a glass! It goes well, this wine. Let us have a lobster! I swear I have an appetite; they make one peckish, these suicides, n'est-ce pas? I shall not be formal—if you consider it your treat, you shall pay. A lobster and another bottle! At your expense, or mine?"

"Ah, the bill all in one!" declared Tournicquot.

"Well, well," said Béguinet, "you must have your way! What a happy man I am! Already I feel twenty years younger. You would not believe what I have suffered. My agonies would fill a book. Really. By nature I am domesticated; but my home is impossible—I shudder when I enter it. It is only in a restaurant that I see a clean table-cloth. Absolutely. I pig. All Lucrèce thinks about is frivolity."

"No, no," protested Tournicquot; "to that I cannot agree."

"What do you know? You 'cannot agree'! You have seen her when she is laced in her stage costume, when she prinks and prattles, with the paint, and the powder, and her best corset on. It is I who am 'behind the scenes,' mon ami, not you. I see her dirty peignoir and her curl rags. At four o'clock in the afternoon. Every day. You 'cannot agree'!"

"Curl rags?" faltered Tournicquot.

"But certainly! I tell you I am of a gentle disposition, I am most tolerant of women's failings; it says much that I would have hanged myself rather than remain with a woman. Her untidiness is not all; her toilette at home revolts my sensibilities, but—well, one cannot have everything, and her salary is substantial; I have closed my eyes to the curl rags. However, snakes are more serious."

"Snakes?" ejaculated Tournicquot.

"Naturally! The beasts must live, do they not support us? But 'Everything in its place' is my own motto; the motto of my wife—'All over the place.' Her serpents have shortened my life, word of honour!—they wander where they will. I never lay my head beside those curl rags of hers without anticipating a cobra-de-capello under the bolster. It is not everybody's money. Lucrèce has no objection to them; well, it is very courageous—very fortunate, since snakes are her profession—but *I*, I was not brought up to snakes; I am not at my ease in a Zoological Gardens."

"It is natural."

"Is it not? I desire to explain myself to you, you understand; are we not as brothers? Oh, I realise well that when one loves a woman one always thinks that the faults are the husband's; believe me I have had much to justify my attitude. Snakes, dirt, furies, what a ménage!"

"Furies?" gasped Tournicquot.

"I am an honest man," affirmed Béguinet, draining another bumper: "I shall not say to you 'I have no blemish, I am perfect.' Not at all. Without doubt, I have occasionally expressed myself to Lucrèce with more candour than courtesy. Such things happen. But"—he refilled his glass, and sighed pathetically—"but to every citizen, whatever his position—whether his affairs may have prospered or not—his wife owes respect. Hein? She should not throw the ragoût at him. She should not menace him with snakes." He wept. "My friend, you will admit that it is not *gentil* to coerce a husband with deadly reptiles?"

Tournicquot had turned very pale. He signed to the waiter for the bill, and when it was discharged, sat regarding his companion with round eyes. At last, clearing his throat, he said nervously:

"After all, do you know—now one comes to think it over—I am not sure, upon my honour, that our arrangement is feasible?"

"What?" exclaimed Béguinet, with a violent start. "Not feasible? How is that, pray? Because I have opened my heart to you, do you back out? Oh, what treachery! Never will I believe you could be capable of it!"

"However, it is a fact. On consideration, I shall not rob you of her."

"Base fellow! You take advantage of my confidence. A contract is a contract!"

"No," stammered Tournicquot, "I shall be a man and live my love down. Monsieur, I have the honour to wish you 'Good-night.'"

"Hé, stop!" cried Béguinet, infuriated. "What then is to become of *me?* Insolent poltroon—you have even destroyed my rope!"

## THE CONSPIRACY FOR CLAUDINE

"ONCE," remarked Tricotrin, pitching his pen in the air, "there were four suitors for the Most Beautiful of her Sex. The first young man was a musician, and he shut himself in his garret to compose a divine melody, to be dedicated to her. The second lover was a chemist, who experimented day and night to discover a unique perfume that she alone might use. The third, who was a floriculturist, aspired constantly among his bulbs to create a silver rose, that should immortalise the lady's name."

"And the fourth," inquired Pitou, "what did the fourth suitor do?"

"The fourth suitor waited for her every afternoon in the sunshine, while the others were at work, and married her with great éclat. The moral of which is that, instead of cracking my head to make a sonnet to Claudine, I shall be wise to put on my hat and go to meet her."

"I rejoice that the dénoûment is arrived at," Pitou returned, "but it would be even more absorbing if I had previously heard of Claudine."

"Miserable dullard!" cried the poet; "do you tell me that you have not previously heard of Claudine? She is the only woman I have ever loved."

"A—ah," rejoined Pitou; "certainly, I have heard of her a thousand times—only she has never been called 'Claudine' before."

"Let us keep to the point," said Tricotrin. "Claudine represents the devotion of a lifetime. I think seriously of writing a tragedy for her to appear in."

"I shall undertake to weep copiously at it if you present me with a pass," affirmed Pitou. "She is an actress, then, this Claudine? At what theatre is she blazing—the Montmartre?"

"How often I find occasion to lament that your imagination is no larger than the quartier! Claudine is not of Montmartre at all, at all. My poor friend, have you never heard that there are theatres on the Grand Boulevard?"

"Ah, so you betake yourself to haunts of fashion? Now I begin to understand why you have become so prodigal with the blacking; for some time I have had the intention of reproaching you with your shoes—our finances are not equal to such lustre."

"Ah, when one truly loves, money is no

object!" said Tricotrin. "However, if it is time mis-spent to write a sonnet to her, it is even more unprofitable to pass the evening justifying one's shoes." And, picking up his hat, the poet ran down the stairs, and made his way as fast as his legs would carry him to the Comédie Moderne.

He arrived at the stage-door with no more than three minutes to spare, and disposing himself in a graceful attitude, waited for mademoiselle Claudine Hilairet to come out. It might have been observed that his confidence deserted him while he waited, for although it was perfectly true that he adored her, he had omitted to add that the passion was not mutual. He was conscious that the lady might resent his presence on the doorstep; and, in fact, when she appeared, she said nothing more tender than—

"Mon Dieu, again you! What do you want?"

"How can you ask?" sighed the poet. "I came to walk home with you lest an electric tram should knock you down at one of the crossings. What a magnificent performance you have given this evening! Superb!"

"Were you in the theatre?"

"In spirit. My spirit, which no official can exclude, is present every night, though sordid considerations force me to remain corporally in my attic. Transported by admiration, I even burst into frantic applause there. How perfect is the sympathy between our souls!"

"Listen, my little one," she said. "I am sorry for your relatives, if you have any—your condition must be a great grief to them. But, all the same, I cannot have you dangling after me and talking this bosh. What do you suppose can come of it?"

"Fame shall come of it," averred the poet, "fame for us both! Do not figure yourself that I am a dreamer. Not at all! I am practical, a man of affairs. Are you content with your position in the Comédie Moderne? No, you are not. You occupy a subordinate position; you play the rôle of a waiting-maid, which is quite unworthy of your genius, and understudy the ingénue, who is a portly matron in robust health. The opportunity to distinguish yourself appears to you as remote as Mars. Do I romance, or is it true?"

"It is true," she said. "Well?"

"Well, I propose to alter all this—I! I have the intention of writing a great tragedy, and when it is accepted, I shall stipulate that you, and you alone, shall thrill Paris as my heroine. When the work of my brain has raised you to the pinnacle for which you were born, when the theatre echoes with our names, I shall fall at your feet, and you will murmur, 'Gustave—I love thee!'"

"Why does not your mother do something?" she asked. "Is there nobody to place you where you might be cured? A tragedy? Imbecile, I am comédienne to the finger-tips! What should I do with your tragedy, even if it were at the Français itself?"

"You are right," said Tricotrin; "I shall turn out a brilliant comedy instead. And when the work of my brain has raised you to the pinnacle for which you were born, when the theatre echoes with our names——"

She interrupted him by a peal of laughter which disconcerted him hardly less than her annoyance.

"It is impossible to be angry with you long," she declared, "you are too comic. Also, as a friend, I do not object to you violently. Come, I advise you to be content with what you can have, instead of crying for the moon!"

"Well, I am not unwilling to make shift with it in the meantime," returned Tricotrin; "but friendship is a poor substitute for the heavens—and we shall see what we shall see. Tell me now, they mean to revive *La Curieuse* at the Comédie, I hear—what part in it have you been assigned?"

"Ah," exclaimed mademoiselle Hilairet, "is it not always the same thing? I dust the same decayed furniture with the same feather brush, and I say ‘Yes,’ and ‘No,’ and ‘Here is a letter, madame.’ That is all.”

“I swear it is infamous!” cried the poet. “It amazes me that they fail to perceive that your gifts are buried. One would suppose that managers would know better than to condemn a great artiste to perform such ignominious rôles. The critics also! Why do not the critics call attention to an outrage which continues year by year? It appears to me that I shall have to use my influence with the Press.” And so serious was the tone in which he made this boast, that the fair Claudine began to wonder if she had after all underrated the position of her out-at-elbows gallant.

“Your influence?” she questioned, with an eager smile. “Have you influence with the critics, then?”

“We shall see what we shall see,” repeated Tricotrin, significantly. “I am not unknown in Paris, and I have your cause at heart—I may make a star of you yet. But while we are on the subject of astronomy, one question! When my services have transformed you to a star, shall I still be compelled to cry for the moon?”

Mademoiselle Hilairet’s tones quivered with emotion as she murmured how grateful to him she would be, and it was understood, when he took leave of her, that if he indeed accomplished his design, his suit would be no longer hopeless.

The poet pressed her hand ardently, and turned homeward in high feather; and it was not until he had trudged a mile or so that the rapture in his soul began to subside under the remembrance that he had been talking through his hat.

"In fact," he admitted to Pitou when the garret was reached, "my imagination took wings unto itself; I am committed to a task beside which the labours of Hercules were child's play. The question now arises how this thing, of which I spoke so confidently, is to be effected. What do you suggest?"

"I suggest that you allow me to sleep," replied Pitou, "for I shall feel less hungry then."

"Your suggestion will not advance us," demurred Tricotrin. "We shall, on the contrary, examine the situation in all its bearings. Listen! Claudine is to enact the waiting-maid in *La Curieuse*, which will be revived at the Comédie Moderne in a fortnight's time; she will dust the Empire furniture, and say 'Yes' and 'No' with all the intellect and animation for which those monosyllables provide an opening. Have you grasped the synopsis so far? Good! On the strength of this performance, it has to be stated by the foremost dramatic critic in Paris that she is an actress of genius. Now, how is it to be done? How shall we induce Labaregue to write of her with an outburst of enthusiasm in *La Voix?*"

"Labaregue?" faltered Pitou. "I declare the audacity of your notion wakes me up!"

"Capital," said Tricotrin, "we are making progress already! Yes, we must have Labaregue—it has never been my custom to do things by halves. Dramatically, of course, I should hold a compromising paper of Labaregue's. I should say, 'Monsieur, the price of this document is an act of justice to mademoiselle Claudine Hilairet. It is agreed? Good! Sit down—you will write from my dictation!'"

"However——" said Pitou.

"However—I anticipate your objection—I do not hold such a paper. Therefore, that scene is cut. Well, let us find another! Where is your fertility of resource? Mon Dieu! why should I speak to him at all?"

"I do not figure myself that you will speak to him, you will never get the chance."

"Precisely my own suspicion. What follows? Instead of wasting my time seeking an interview which would not be granted——"

"And which would lead to nothing even if it were granted!"

"And which would lead to nothing even if it were granted, as you point out; instead of doing this, it is evident that I must write Labaregue's criticism myself ! "

" Hein ? " ejaculated Pitou, sitting up in bed.

" I confess that I do not perceive yet how it is to be managed, but obviously it is the only course. *I* must write what is to be said, and *La Voix* must believe that it has been written by Labaregue. Come, we are getting on famously—we have now decided what we are to avoid ! "

" By D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis," cried Pitou, " this will be the doughtiest adventure in which we have engaged ! "

" You are right, it is an adventure worthy of our steel . . . pens ! We shall enlighten the public, crown an artiste, and win her heart by way of reward—that is to say, *I* shall win her heart by way of reward. What your own share of the booty will be I do not recognise, but I promise you, at least, a generous half of the dangers."

" My comrade," murmured Pitou ; " ever loyal ! But do you not think that *La Voix* will smell a rat ? What about the handwriting ? "

" It is a weak point which had already presented itself to me. Could I have constructed the situation to my liking, Labaregue would have the custom to type-write his notices ; however, as he is so inconsiderate as to knock them off in the Café de l'Europe, he has not that custom, and we must adapt ourselves to the circumstances that exist. The probability is that a criticism delivered by the accredited messenger, and signed with the familiar 'J. L.' will be passed without question; the difference in the handwriting may be attributed to an amanuensis. When the great man writes his next notice, I shall make it my business to be taking a bock in the Café de l'Europe, in order that I may observe closely what happens. There is to be a répétition générale at the Vaudeville on Monday night—on Monday night, therefore, I hope to advise you of our plan of campaign. Now do not speak to me any more—I am about to compose a eulogy on Claudine, for which Labaregue will, in due course, receive the credit."

The poet fell asleep at last, murmuring dithyrambic phrases; and if you suppose that in the soberness of daylight he renounced his harebrained project, it is certain that you have never lived with Tricotrin in Montmartre.

No, indeed, he did not renounce it. On Monday night—or rather in the small hours of Tuesday morning—he awoke Pitou with enthusiasm.

"Mon vieux," he exclaimed, "the evening has been well spent! I have observed, and I have reflected. When he quitted the Vaudeville, Labaregue entered the Café de l'Europe, seated himself at his favourite table, and wrote without cessation for half an hour. When his critique was finished, he placed it in an envelope, and commanded his supper. All this time I, sipping a bock leisurely, accorded to his actions a scrutiny worthy of the secret police. Presently a lad from the office of *La Voix* appeared; he approached Labaregue, received the envelope, and departed. At this point, my bock was finished; I paid for it and sauntered out, keeping the boy well in view. His route to the office lay through a dozen streets which were all deserted at so late an hour; but I remarked one that was even more forbidding than the rest—a mere alley that seemed positively to have been designed for our purpose. Our course is clear—we shall attack him in the rue des Cendres."

"Really?" inquired Pitou, somewhat startled.

"But really! We will not shed his blood; we will make him turn out his pockets, and then, disgusted by the smallness of the swag, toss it back to him with a flip on the ear. Needless to say that when he escapes, he will be the bearer of *my* criticism, not of Labaregue's. He will have been too frightened to remark the exchange."

"It is not bad, your plan."

"It is an inspiration. But to render it absolutely safe, we must have an accomplice."

"Why, is he so powerful, your boy?"

"No, mon ami, the boy is not so powerful, but the alley has two ends—I do not desire to be arrested while I am giving a lifelike representation of an apache. I think we will admit Lajeunie to our scheme—as a novelist he should appreciate the situation. If Lajeunie keeps guard at one end of the alley, while you stand at the other, I can do the business without risk of being interrupted and removed to gaol."

"It is true. As a danger signal, I shall whistle the first bars of my Fugue."

"Good! And we will arrange a signal with Lajeunie also. Mon Dieu! will not Claudine be amazed next day? I shall not breathe a word to her in the meantime; I shall let her open *La Voix* without expectation; and then—ah, what joy will be hers! 'The success of the evening was made by the actress who took the rôle of the maid-servant, and who had perhaps six words to utter. But with what vivacity, with what esprit were they delivered! Every gesture, every sparkle of the eyes, betokened the comédienne. For myself, I ceased to regard the fatuous ingénue, I forgot the presence of the famous leading lady; I watched absorbed the facial play of this maid-servant, whose brains and beauty, I predict, will speedily bring Paris to her feet'!"

"Is that what you mean to write?"

"I shall improve upon it. I am constantly improving—that is why the notice is still unfinished. It hampers me that I must compose in the strain of Labaregue himself, instead of allowing my eloquence to soar. By the way, we had better speak to Lajeunie on the subject soon, lest he should pretend that he has another engagement for that night; he is a good boy, Lajeunie, but he always pretends that he has engagements in fashionable circles."

The pair went to him the following day, and when they had climbed to his garret, found the young literary man in bed.

"It shocks me," said Pitou, "to perceive that you rise so late, Lajeunie; why are you not dashing off chapters of a romance?"

"Mon Dieu!" replied Lajeunie, "I was making studies among the beau monde until a late hour last night at a reception; and, to complete my fatigue, it was impossible to get a cab when I left."

"Naturally; it happens to everybody when he lacks a cab-fare," said Tricotrin. "Now tell me, have you any invitation from a duchess for next Thursday evening?"

"Thursday, Thursday?" repeated Lajeunie thoughtfully. "No, I believe that I am free for Thursday."

"Now, that is fortunate!" exclaimed Tricotrin. "Well, we want you to join us on that evening, my friend."

"Indeed, we should be most disappointed if you could not," put in Pitou.

"Certainly; I shall have much pleasure," said Lajeunie. "Is it a supper?"

"No," said Tricotrin, "it is a robbery. I shall explain. Doubtless you know the name of 'mademoiselle Claudine Hilairet'?"

"I have never heard it in my life. Is she in Society?"

"Society? She is in the Comédie Moderne. She is a great actress, but—like us all—unrecognised."

"My heart bleeds for her. Another comrade!"

"I was sure I could depend upon your sympathy. Well, on Thursday night they will revive *La Curieuse* at the Comédie, and I myself propose to write Labaregue's critique of the performance. Do you tumble?"

"It is a gallant action. Yes, I grasp the climax, but at present I do not perceive how the plot is to be constructed."

"Labaregue's notices are dispatched by messenger," began Pitou.

"From the Café de l'Europe," added Tricotrin.

"So much I know," said Lajeunie.

"I shall attack the messenger, and make a slight exchange of manuscripts," Tricotrin went on.

"A blunder!" proclaimed Lajeunie; "you show a lack of invention. Now be guided by me, because I am a novelist and I understand these things. The messenger is an escaped convict, and you say to him, 'I know your secret. You do my bidding, or you go back to the galleys; I shall give you three minutes to decide!' You stand before him, stern, dominant, inexorable—your watch in your hand."

"It is at the pawn-shop."

"Well, well, of course it is; since when have you joined the realists? Somebody else's watch—or a clock. Are there no clocks in Paris? You say, 'I shall give you until the clock strikes the hour.' That is even more literary—you obtain the solemn note of the clock to mark the crisis."

"But there is no convict," demurred Tricotrin; "there are clocks, but there is no convict."

"No convict? The messenger is not a convict?"

"Not at all—he is an apple-cheeked boy."

"Oh, it is a rotten plot," said Lajeunie; "I shall not collaborate in it!"

"Consider!" cried Tricotrin; "do not throw away the chance of a lifetime, think what I offer you—you shall hang about the end of a dark alley, and whistle if anybody comes. How literary again is that! You may develop it into a novel that will make you celebrated. Pitou will be at the other end. I and the apple-cheeked boy who is to die—that is to say, to be duped—will occupy the centre of the stage—I mean the middle of the alley. And on the morrow, when all Paris rings with the fame of Claudine Hilairet, I, who adore her, shall have won her heart!"

"Humph," said Lajeunie. "Well, since the synopsis has a happy ending, I consent. But I make one condition—I must wear a crêpe mask. Without a crêpe mask I perceive no thrill in my rôle."

"Madness!" objected Pitou. "Now listen to *me*—I am serious-minded, and do not commit follies, like you fellows. Crêpe masks are not being worn this season. Believe me, if you loiter at a street corner with a crêpe mask on, some passer-by will regard you, he may even wonder what you are doing there. It might ruin the whole job."

"Pitou is right," announced Tricotrin, after profound consideration.

"Well, then," said Lajeunie, "*you* must wear a crêpe mask! Put it on when you attack the boy. I have always had a passion for crêpe masks, and this is the first opportunity that I find to gratify it. I insist that somebody wears a crêpe mask, or I wash my hands of the conspiracy."

"Agreed! In the alley it will do no harm; indeed it will prevent the boy identifying me. Good, on Thursday night then! In the meantime we shall rehearse the crime assiduously, and you and Pitou can practise your whistles."

With what diligence did the poet write each day now! How lovingly he selected his superlatives! Never in the history of the Press had such ardent care been lavished on a criticism—truly it was not until Thursday afternoon that he was satisfied that he could do no more. He put the pages in his pocket, and, too impatient even to be hungry, roamed about the quartier, reciting to himself the most hyperbolic of his periods.

And dusk gathered over Paris, and the lights sprang out, and the tense hours crept away.

It was precisely half-past eleven when the three conspirators arrived at the doors of the Comédie Moderne, and lingered near by until the audience poured forth. Labaregue was among the first to appear. He paused on the steps to take a cigarette, and stepped briskly into the noise and glitter of the Boulevard. The young men followed, exchanging feverish glances. Soon the glow of the Café de l'Europe was visible. The critic entered, made a sign to a waiter, and seated himself gravely at a table.

Many persons gazed at him with interest. To those who did not know, habitués whispered, "There is Labaregue—see, he comes to write his criticism on the revival of *La Curieuse!*" Labaregue affected unconsciousness of all this, but secretly he lapped it up. Occasionally he passed his hand across his brow with a gesture profoundly intellectual.

Few there remarked that at brief intervals three shabby young men strolled in, who betrayed no knowledge of one another, and merely called for bocks. None suspected that these humble customers plotted to consign the celebrity's criticism to the flames.

Without a sign of recognition, taciturn and impassive, the three young men waited, their eyes bent upon the critic's movements.

By-and-by Labaregue thrust his "copy" into an envelope that was provided. Some moments afterwards one of the young men asked another waiter for the materials to write a letter. The paper he crumpled in his pocket; in the envelope he placed the forged critique.

A quarter of an hour passed. Then a youth of about sixteen hurried in and made his way to Labaregue's table. At this instant Lajeunie rose and left. As the youth received the "copy," Tricotrin also sauntered out. When the youth again reached the door, it was just swinging behind Pitou.

The conspirators were now in the right order—Lajeunie pressing forward, Tricotrin keeping pace with the boy, Pitou a few yards in the rear.

The boy proceeded swiftly. It was late, and even the Boulevard showed few pedestrians now; in the side streets the quietude was unbroken. Tricotrin whipped on his mask at the opening of the passage. When the messenger was half-way through it, the attack was made suddenly, with determination.

"Fat one," exclaimed the poet, "I starve—give me five francs!"

"*Comment?*" stammered the youth, jumping; "I haven't five francs, I!"

"Give me all you have—empty your pockets, let me see! If you obey, I shall not harm you; if you resist, you are a dead boy!"

The youth produced, with trepidation, a sou, half a cigarette, a piece of string, a murderous clasp knife, a young lady's photograph, and Labaregue's notice. The next moment the exchange of manuscripts had been deftly accomplished.

"Devil take your rubbish," cried the apache; "I want none of it—there! Be off, or I shall shoot you for wasting my time."

The whole affair had occupied less than a minute; and the three adventurers skipped to Montmartre rejoicing.

And how glorious was their jubilation in the hour when they opened *La Voix* and read Tricotrin's pronouncement over the initials "J. L."! There it was, printed word for word—the leading lady was dismissed with a line, the ingénue received a sneer, and for the rest, the column was a panegyric of the waiting-maid! The triumph of the waiting-maid was unprecedented and supreme. Certainly, when Labaregue saw the paper, he flung round to the office furious. But *La Voix* did not desire people to know that it had been taken in; so the matter was hushed up, and Labaregue went about pretending that he actually thought all those fine things of the waiting-maid.

The only misfortune was that when Tricotrin called victoriously upon Claudine, to clasp her in his arms, he found her in hysterics on the sofa—and it transpired that she had not represented the waiting-maid after all. On the contrary, she had at the last moment been promoted to the part of the ingénue, while the waiting-maid had been played by a little actress whom she much disliked.

"It is cruel, it is monstrous, it is heart-rending!" gasped Tricotrin, when he grasped the enormity of his failure; "but, light of my life, why should you blame *me* for this villainy of Labaregue's?"

"I do not know," she said; "however, you bore me, you and your 'influence with the Press.' Get out!"

# THE DOLL IN THE PINK SILK DRESS

How can I write the fourth Act with this ridiculous thing posed among my papers? What thing? It is a doll in a pink silk dress—an elaborate doll that walks, and talks, and warbles snatches from the operas. A terrible lot it cost! Why does an old dramatist keep a doll on his study table? I do not keep it there. It came in a box from the Boulevard an hour ago, and I took it from its wrappings to admire its accomplishments again—and ever since it has been reminding me that women are strange beings.

Yes, women are strange, and this toy sets me thinking of one woman in particular: that woman who sued, supplicated for my help, and then, when she had all my interest—— Confound the doll; here is the incident, just as it happened!

It happened when all Paris flocked to see my plays and "Paul de Varenne" was a name to conjure with. Fashions change. To-day I am a little out of the running, perhaps; younger men have shot forward. In those days I was still supreme, I was master of the Stage.

Listen! It was a spring morning, and I was lolling at my study window, scenting the lilac in the air. Maximin, my secretary, came in and said:

"Mademoiselle Jeanne Laurent asks if she can see you, monsieur."

"Who is mademoiselle Jeanne Laurent?" I inquired.

"She is an actress begging for an engagement, monsieur."

"I regret that I am exceedingly busy. Tell her to write."

"The lady has already written a thousand times," he mentioned, going. "'Jeanne Laurent' has been one of the most constant contributors to our waste-paper basket."

"Then tell her that I regret I can do nothing for her. Mon Dieu! is it imagined that I have no other occupation than to interview nonentities? By the way, how is it you have bothered me about her, why this unusual embassy? I suppose she is pretty, hein?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And young?"

"Yes, monsieur."

I wavered. Let us say my sympathy was stirred. But perhaps the lilac was responsible—lilac and a pretty girl seem to me a natural combination, like coffee and a cigarette. "Send her in!" I said.

I sat at the table and picked up a pen.

"Monsieur de Varenne——" She paused nervously on the threshold.

Maximin was a fool, she was not "pretty"; she was either plain, or beautiful. To my mind, she had beauty, and if she hadn't been an actress come to pester me for a part I should have foreseen a very pleasant quarter of an hour. "I can spare you only a moment, mademoiselle," I said, ruffling blank paper.

"It is most kind of you to spare me that."

I liked her voice too. "Be seated," I said more graciously.

"Monsieur, I have come to implore you to do something for me. I am breaking my heart in the profession for want of a helping hand. Will you be generous and give me a chance?"

"My dear mademoiselle—er—Laurent," I said, "I sympathise with your difficulties, and I thoroughly understand them, but I have no engagement to offer you—I am not a manager."

She smiled bitterly. "You are de Varenne—a word from you would 'make' me!"

I was wondering what her age was. About eight-and-twenty, I thought, but alternately she looked much younger and much older.

"You exaggerate my influence—like every other artist that I consent to see. Hundreds have sat in that chair and cried that I could 'make' them. It is all bosh. Be reasonable! I cannot 'make' anybody."

"You could cast me for a part in Paris. You are 'not a manager,' but any manager will engage a woman that you recommend. Oh, I know that hundreds appeal to you, I know that I am only one of a crowd; but, monsieur, think what it means to me! Without help, I shall go on knocking at the stage doors of Paris and never get inside; I shall go on writing to the Paris managers and never get an answer. Without help I shall go on eating my heart out in the provinces till I am old and tired and done for!"

Her earnestness touched me. I had heard the same tale so often that I was sick of hearing it, but this woman's earnestness touched me. If I had had a small part vacant, I would have tried her in it.

"Again," I said, "as a dramatist I fully understand the difficulties of an actress's career; but you, as an actress, do not understand a dramatist's. There is no piece of mine going into rehearsal now, therefore I have no opening for you, myself; and it is impossible for me to write to a manager or a brother author, advising him to entrust a part, even the humblest, to a lady of whose capabilities I know nothing."

"I am not applying for a humble part," she answered quietly.

"Hein?"

"My line is lead."

I stared at her pale face, speechless; the audacity of the reply took my breath away.

"You are mad," I said, rising.

"I sound so to you, monsieur?"

"Stark, staring mad. You bewail that you are at the foot of the ladder, and at the same instant you stipulate that I shall lift you at a bound to the top. Either you are a lunatic, or you are an amateur."

She, too, rose—resigned to her dismissal, it seemed. Then, suddenly, with a gesture that was a veritable abandonment of despair, she laughed.

"That's it, I am an amateur!" she rejoined passionately. "I will tell you the kind of 'amateur' I am, monsieur de Varenne! I was learning my business in a fit-up when I was six years old—yes, I was playing parts on the road when happier children were playing games in nurseries. I was thrust on for lead when I was a gawk of fifteen, and had to wrestle with half a dozen rôles in a week, and was beaten if I failed to make my points. I have supered to stars, not to earn the few francs I got by it, for by that time the fit-ups paid me better, but that I might observe, and improve my method. I have waited in the rain, for hours, at the doors of the milliners and modistes, that I might note how great ladies stepped from their carriages and spoke to their footmen—and when I snatched a lesson from their aristocratic tones I was in heaven, though my feet ached and the rain soaked my wretched clothes. I have played good women and bad women, beggars and queens, ingénues and hags. I was born and bred on the stage, have suffered and starved on it. It is my life and my destiny." She sobbed. "An 'amateur'!"

I could not let her go like that. She interested me strongly; somehow I believed in her. I strode to and fro, considering.

"Sit down again," I said. "I will do this for you: I will go to the country to see your performance. When is your next show?"

"I have nothing in view."

"Bigre! Well, the next time you are playing, write to me."

"You will have forgotten all about me," she urged feverishly, "or your interest will have faded, or Fate will prevent your coming."

"Why do you say so?"

"Something tells me. You will help me now, or you will never help me—my chance is to-day! Monsieur, I entreat you——"

"To-day I can do nothing at all, because I have not seen you act."

"I could recite to you."

"Zut!"

"I could rehearse on trial."

"And if you made a mess of it? A nice fool I should look, after fighting to get you in!"

A servant interrupted us to tell me that my old friend de Lavardens was downstairs. And now I did a foolish thing. When I intimated to mademoiselle Jeanne Laurent that our interview must conclude, she begged so hard to be allowed to speak to me again after my visitor went, that I consented to her waiting. Why? I had already said all that I had to say, and infinitely more than I had contemplated. Perhaps she impressed me more powerfully than I realised; perhaps it was sheer compassion, for she had an invincible instinct that if I sent her away at this juncture, she would never hear from me any more. I had her shown into the next room, and received General de Lavardens in the study.

Since his retirement from the Army, de Lavardens had lived in his château at St. Wandrille, in the neighbourhood of Caudebec-en-Caux, and we had met infrequently of late. But we had been at college together; I had entered on my military service in the same regiment as he; and we had once been comrades. I was glad to see him.

"How are you, my dear fellow? I didn't know you were in Paris."

"I have been here twenty-four hours," he said. "I have looked you up at the first opportunity. Now am I a nuisance? Be frank!

I told the servant that if you were at work you weren't to be disturbed. Don't humbug about it; if I am in the way, say so!"

"You are not in the way a bit," I declared. "Put your hat and cane down. What's the news? How is Georges?"

"Georges" was Captain de Lavardens, his son, a young man with good looks, and brains, an officer for whom people predicted a brilliant future.

"Georges is all right," he said hesitatingly. "He is dining with me to-night. I want you to come, too, if you can. Are you free?"

"To-night? Yes, certainly; I shall be delighted."

"That was one of the reasons I came round—to ask you to join us." He glanced towards the table again. "Are you sure you are not in a hurry to get back to that?"

"Have a cigar, and don't be a fool. What have you got to say for yourself? Why are you on the spree here?"

"I came up to see Georges," he said. "As a matter of fact, my dear chap, I am devilish worried."

"Not about Georges?" I asked, surprised.

He grunted. "About Georges."

"Really? I'm very sorry."

"Yes. I wanted to talk to you about it. You may be able to give me a tip. Georges—the boy I hoped so much for"—his gruff voice quivered—"is infatuated with an actress."

"Georges?"

"What do you say to that?"

"Are you certain it is true?"

"True? He makes no secret of it. That isn't all. The idiot wants to marry her!"

"Georges wants to marry an actress?"

"Voilà!"

"My dear old friend!" I stammered.

"Isn't it amazing? One thinks one knows the character of one's own son, hein? And then, suddenly, a boy—a boy? A man! Georges will soon be thirty—a man one is proud of, who is distinguishing himself in his profession, he loses his head about some creature of the theatre and proposes to mar his whole career."

"As for that, it might not mar it," I said.

"We are not in England, in France gentlemen do not choose their wives from the stage! I can speak freely to you; you move among these people because your writing has taken you among them, but you are not of their breed."

"Have you reasoned with him?"

"Reasoned? Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Prepare to be amused. He said that 'unfortunately, the lady did not love him'!"

"What? Then there is no danger?"

"Do you mean to say that it takes you in? You may be sure her 'reluctance' is policy, she thinks it wise to disguise her eagerness to hook him. He told me plainly that he would not rest till he had won her. It is a nice position! The honour of the family is safe only till this adventuress consents, *consents* to accept his hand! What can I do? I can retard the marriage by refusing my permission, but I cannot prevent it, if he summons me. . . . Of course, if I could arrange matters with her, I would do it like a shot—at any price!"

"Who is she?"

"A nobody; he tells me she is quite obscure. I don't suppose you have ever heard of her. But I thought you might make inquiries for me, that you might ascertain whether she is the sort of woman we could settle with?"

"I will do all I can, you may depend. Where is she—in Paris?"

"Yes, just now."

"What's her name?"

"Jeanne Laurent."

My mouth fell open: "Hein?"

"Do you know her?"

"She is there!"

"What?"

"In the next room. She just called on business."

"Mon Dieu! That's queer!"

"It's lucky. It was the first time I had ever met her."

"What's she like?"

"Have you never seen her? You shall do so in a minute. She came to beg me to advance her professionally, she wants my help. This ought to save you some money, my friend. We'll have her in! I shall tell her who you are."

"How shall I talk to her?"

"Leave it to me."

I crossed the landing, and opened the salon door. The room was littered with the illustrated journals, but she was not diverting herself with any of them—she was sitting before a copy of *La Joconde*, striving to reproduce on her own face the enigma of the smile: I had discovered an actress who never missed an opportunity.

"Please come here."

She followed me back, and my friend stood scowling at her.

"This gentleman is General de Lavardens," I said.

She bowed—slightly, perfectly. That bow acknowledged de Lavardens' presence, and rebuked the manner of my introduction, with all the dignity of the patricians whom she had studied in the rain.

"Mademoiselle, when my servant announced that the General was downstairs you heard the name. You did not tell me that you knew his son."

"Dame, non, monsieur!" she murmured.

"And when you implored me to assist you, you did not tell me that you aspired to a marriage that would compel you to leave the stage. I never waste my influence. Good-morning!"

"I do not aspire to the marriage," she faltered, pale as death.

"Rubbish, I know all about it. Of course, it is your aim to marry him sooner or later, and of course he will make it a condition that you cease to act. Well, I have no time to help a woman who is playing the fool! That's all about it. I needn't detain you."

"I have refused to marry him," she gasped. "On my honour! You can ask him. It is a fact."

"But you see him still," broke in de Lavardens wrathfully; "he is with you every day! That is a fact, too, isn't it? If your refusal is sincere, why are you not consistent? why do you want him at your side?"

"Because, monsieur," she answered, "I am weak enough to miss him when he goes."

"Ah! you admit it. You profess to be in love with him?"

"No, monsieur," she dissented thoughtfully, "I am not in love with him—and my refusal has been quite sincere, incredible as it may seem that a woman like myself rejects a man like him. I could never make a marriage that would mean death to my ambition. I could not sacrifice my art—the stage is too dear to me for that. So it is evident that I am not in love with him, for when a woman loves, the man is dearer to her than all else."

De Lavardens grunted. I knew his grunts: there was some apology in this one.

"The position is not fair to my son," he demurred. "You show good sense in what you say—you are an artist, you are quite right to devote yourself to your career; but you reject and encourage him at the same time. If he married you it would be disastrous—to you, and to him; you would ruin his life, and spoil your own. Enfin, give him a chance to forget you! Send him away. What do you want to keep seeing him for?'

She sighed. "It is wrong of me, I own!"

"It is highly unnatural," said I.

"No, monsieur; it is far from being unnatural, and I will tell you why—he is the only man I have ever known, in all my vagabond life, who realised that a struggling actress might have the soul of a gentlewoman. Before I met him, I had never heard a man speak to me with courtesy, excepting on the stage; I had never known a man to take my hand respectfully when he was not performing behind the footlights. . . .

I met him first in the country; I was playing the Queen in *Ruy Blas*, and the manager brought him to me in the wings. In everything he said and did he was different from others. We were friends for months before he told me that he loved me. His friendship has been the gift of God, to brighten my miserable lot. Never to see him any more would be awful to me!"

I perceived that if she was not in love with him she was so dangerously near to it that a trifle might turn the scale. De Lavardens had the same thought. His glance at me was apprehensive.

"However, you acknowledge that you are behaving badly!" I exclaimed. "It is all right for *you*, friendship is enough for you, and you pursue your career. But for *him*, it is different; he seeks your love, and he neglects his duties. For him to spend his life sighing for you would be monstrous, and for him to marry you would be fatal. If you like him so much, be just to him, set him free! Tell him that he is not to visit you any more."

"He does not visit me; he has never been inside my lodging."

"Well, that he is not to write there—that there are to be no more dinners, drives, bouquets!"

"And I do not let him squander money on me. I am not that kind of woman."

"We do not accuse you, mademoiselle. On

the contrary, we appeal to your good heart. Be considerate, be brave! Say good-bye to him!"

"You are asking me to suffer cruelly," she moaned.

"It is for your friend's benefit. Also, the more you suffer, the better you will act. Every actress should suffer."

"Monsieur, I have served my apprenticeship to pain."

"There are other things than friendship—you have your prospects to think about."

"What prospects?" she flashed back.

"Well, I cannot speak definitely to-day, as you know; but you would not find me unappreciative."

De Lavardens grunted again—emotionally, this time. I checked him with a frown.

"What use would it be for me to refuse to see him?" she objected chokily. "When I am playing anywhere, *he* can always see *me*. I cannot kill his love by denying myself his companionship. Besides, he would not accept the dismissal. One night, when I left the theatre, I should find him waiting there again."

This was unpalatably true.

"If a clever woman desires to dismiss a man, she can dismiss him thoroughly, especially a clever actress," I said. "You could talk to him in such a fashion that he would have no wish to meet you again. Such things have been done."

"What? You want me to teach him to despise me?"

"Much better if he did!"

"To turn his esteem to scorn, hein?"

"It would be a generous action."

"To falsify and degrade myself?"

"For your hero's good!"

"I will not do it!" she flamed. "You demand too much. What have *you* done for *me* that I should sacrifice myself to please you? I entreat your help, and you give me empty phrases; I cry that I despair this morning, and you answer that by-and-by, some time, in the vague future, you will remember that I exist. I shall not do this for you—I keep my friend!"

"Your rhetoric has no weight with me," I said. "I do not pretend that I have a claim on you. In such circumstances a noble woman would take the course I suggest, not for my sake, not for the sake of General de Lavardens, but for the sake of the man himself. You will 'keep your friend'? Bien! But you will do so because you are indifferent to his welfare and too selfish to release him."

She covered her face. There were tears on it. The General and I exchanged glances again.

I went on:

"You charge me with giving you only empty phrases. That is undeserved. I said all that was possible, and I meant what I said. I could not pledge myself to put you into anything without knowing what you are capable of doing; but, if you retain my good will, I repeat that I will attend your next performance."

"And then?" she queried.

"Then—if I think well of it—you shall have a good part."

"Lead?"

"Bigre! I cannot say that. A good part, in Paris!"

"It is a promise?"

"Emphatically—if I think well of your performance."

"Of my next—the very next part I play?"

"Of the very next part you play."

She paused, reflecting. The pause lasted so long that it began to seem to my suspense as if none of us would ever speak again. I took a cigarette, and offered the box, in silence, to de Lavardens. He shook his head without turning it to me, his gaze was riveted on the woman.

"All right," she groaned, "I agree!"

"Ah! good girl!"

"All you require is that Captain de Lavardens shall no longer seek me for his wife. Is that it?"

"That's it."

"Very well. I know what would repel him—

it shall be done to-night. But you, gentlemen, will have to make the opportunity for me; you will have to bring him to my place—both of you. You can find some reason for proposing it? To-night at nine o'clock. He knows the address."

She moved weakly to the door.

De Lavardens took three strides and grasped her hands. "Mademoiselle," he stuttered, "I have no words to speak my gratitude. I am a father, and I love my son, but—mon Dieu! if—if things had been different, upon my soul, I should have been proud to call you my daughter-in-law!"

Oh, how she could bow, that woman—the eloquence of her ill-fed form!

"Au revoir, gentlemen," she said.

Phew! We dropped into chairs.

"Paul," he grunted at me, "we have been a pair of brutes!"

"I know it. But you feel much relieved?"

"I feel another man. What is she going to say to him? I wish it were over. *I* should find it devilish difficult to propose going to see her, you know! It will have to be *your* suggestion. And supposing he won't take us?"

"He will take us right enough," I declared, "and rejoice at the chance. Hourra! hourra! hourra!" I sprang up and clapped him on the back. "My friend, if that woman had thrown herself away on Georges it might have been a national calamity."

"What?" he roared, purpling.

"Oh, no slight to Georges! I think—I think—I am afraid to say what I think, I am afraid to think it!" I paced the room, struggling to control myself. "Only, once in a blue moon, Jules, there is a woman born of the People with a gift that is a blessing, and a curse—and her genius makes an epoch, and her name makes theatrical history. And if a lover of the stage like me discovers such a woman, you stodgy old soldier, and blazes her genius in his work, he feels like Cheops, Chephrenus, and Asychis rearing the Pyramids for immortality!"

My excitement startled him. "You believe she is a genius? Really?"

"I dare not believe," I panted. "I refuse to let myself believe, for I have never seen blue moons. But—but—I wonder!"

We dined at Voisin's. It had been arranged that he should make some allusion to the courtship; and I said to Georges, "I hope you don't mind your father having mentioned the subject to me—we are old friends, you know?" The topic was led up to very easily. It was apparent that Georges thought the world of her. I admired the way he spoke. It was quiet and earnest. As I feigned partial sympathy with his matrimonial hopes, I own that I felt a Judas.

"I, too, am an artist," I said. "To me social distinctions naturally seem somewhat less important than they do to your father."

"Indeed, monsieur," he answered gravely, "mademoiselle Laurent is worthy of homage. If she were willing to accept me, every man who knew her character would think me fortunate. Her education has not qualified her to debate with professors, and she has no knowledge of society small-talk, but she is intelligent, and refined, and good."

It was child's play. A sudden notion, over the liqueurs: "Take us to see her! Come along, mon ami!" Astonishment (amateurish); persuasion (masterly); Georges's diffidence to intrude, but his obvious delight at the thought of the favourable impression she would create. He had "never called there yet—it would be very unconventional at such an hour?" "Zut, among artists! My card will be a passport, I assure you." Poor fellow, the trap made short work of him! At half-past eight we were all rattling to the left bank in a cab.

The cab stopped before a dilapidated house in an unsavoury street. I knew that the aspect of her home went to his heart. "Mademoiselle Laurent has won no prize in her profession," he observed, "and she is an honest girl." Well said! In the dim passage a neglected child directed us to the fourth floor. On the fourth floor a slattern, who replied at last to our persistent tapping, told us shortly that mademoiselle was out. I realised that we had committed the error of being before our time; and the woman, evidently unprepared for our visit, did not suggest our going in. It seemed bad stage-management.

"Will it be long before mademoiselle is back?" I inquired, annoyed.

"Mais non."

"We will wait," I said, and we were admitted sulkily to a room, of which the conspicuous features were a malodorous lamp, and a brandy-bottle. I had taken the old drab for a landlady rather the worse for liquor, but, more amiably, she remarked now: "It's a pity Jeanne didn't know you were coming."

At the familiar "Jeanne" I saw Georges start.

"Mademoiselle is a friend of yours?" I asked, dismayed.

"A friend? She is my daughter." She sat down.

By design the girl was out! The thought flashed on me. It flashed on me that she had plotted for her lover to learn what a mother-in-law he would have. The revelation must appal him. I stole a look—his face was blanched. The General drew a deep breath, and nodded to himself. The nod said plainly, "He is saved. Thank God!"

"Will you take a little drop while you are waiting, gentlemen?"

"Nothing for us, thank you."

She drank alone, and seemed to forget that we were present. None of us spoke. I began to wonder if we need remain. Then, drinking, she grew garrulous. It was of Jeanne she talked. She gave us her maternal views, and incidentally betrayed infamies of her own career. I am a man of the world, but I shuddered at that woman. The suitor who could have risked making her child his wife would have been demented, or sublime. And while she maundered on, gulping from her glass, and chuckling at her jests, the ghastliness of it was that, in the gutter face before us, I could trace a likeness to Jeanne; I think Georges must have traced it, too. The menace of heredity was horrible. We were listening to Jeanne wrecked, Jeanne thirty years older—Jeanne as she might become!

Ciel! To choose a bride with this blood in her—a bride from the dregs!

"Let us go, Georges," I murmured. "Courage! You will forget her. We'll be off."

He was livid. I saw that he could bear no more.

But the creature overheard, and in those bleary eyes intelligence awoke.

"What? Hold on!" she stammered. "Is one of you the toff that wants to marry her? Ah! . . . I've been letting on finely, haven't

I? It was a plant, was it? You've come here ferreting and spying?" She turned towards me in a fury: "You!"

Certainly I had made a comment from time to time, but I could not see why she should single me out for her attack. She lurched towards me savagely. Her face was thrust into mine. And then, so low that only I could hear, and like another woman, she breathed a question:

"Can I act?"

Jeanne herself! Every nerve in me jumped. The next instant she was back in her part, railing at Georges.

I took a card from my case, and scribbled six words.

"When your daughter comes in, give her that!" I said. I had scribbled: "I write you a star rôle!"

She gathered the message at a glance, and I swear that the moroseness of her gaze was not lightened by so much as a gleam. She was representing a character; the actress sustained the character even while she read words that were to raise her from privation to renown.

"Not that I care if I *have* queered her chance," she snarled. "A good job, too, the selfish cat! I've got nothing to thank her for. Serve her right if you do give her the go-by, my Jackanapes, *I* don't blame you!"

"Madame Laurent," Georges answered sternly, and his answer vibrated through the room, "I have never admired, pitied, or loved Jeanne so much as now that I know that she has been—motherless."

All three of us stood stone-still. The first to move was she. I saw what was going to happen. She burst out crying.

"It's I, Jeanne!—I love you! I thought I loved the theatre best—I was wrong." Instinctively she let my card fall to the ground. "Forgive me—I did it for your sake, too. It was cruel, I am ashamed. Oh, my own, if my love will not disgrace you, take me for your wife! In all the world there is no woman who will love you better—in all my heart there is no room for anything but you!"

They were in each other's arms. De Lavardens, whom the proclamation of identity had electrified, dragged me outside. The big fool was blubbering with sentiment.

"This is frightful," he grunted.

"Atrocious!" said I.

"But she is a woman in a million."

"She is a great actress," I said reverently.

"I could never approve the marriage," he faltered. "What do you think?"

"Out of the question! I have no sympathy with either of them."

"You humbug! Why, there is a tear running down your nose!"

"There are two running down yours," I snapped; "a General should know better."

And why has the doll in the pink silk dress recalled this to me? Well, you see, to-morrow will be New Year's Day and the doll is a gift for my godchild—and the name of my godchild's mother is "Jeanne de Lavardens." Oh, I have nothing to say against her as a mother, the children idolise her! I admit that she has conquered the General, and that Georges is the proudest husband in France. But when I think of the parts I could have written for her, of the lustre the stage has lost, when I reflect that, just to be divinely happy, the woman deliberately declined a world-wide fame—Morbleu! I can never forgive her for it, never—the darling!

# THE LAST EFFECT

Jean Bourjac was old and lazy. Why should he work any more? In his little cottage he was content enough. If the place was not precisely gay, could he not reach Paris for a small sum? And if he had no neighbours to chat with across the wall, weren't there his flowers to tend in the garden? Occasionally—because one cannot shake off the interests of a lifetime—he indulged in an evening at the Folies-Bergère, or Olympia, curious to witness some Illusion that had made a hit.

At such times old Bourjac would chuckle and wag his head sagely, for he saw no Illusions now to compare with those invented by himself when he was in the business.

And there were many persons who admitted that he had been supreme in his line. At the Folies-Bergère he was often recognised and addressed as "Maître."

One summer evening, when old Bourjac sat reading *Le Journal*, Margot, the housekeeper, who had grown deaf and ancient in his service, announced a stranger.

She was a girl with a delicate oval face, and eyes like an angel's.

"Monsieur Bourjac," she began, as if reciting a speech that she had studied, "I have come out here to beg a favour of you. I thirst for a career behind the footlights. Alas! I cannot sing, or dance, or act. There is only one chance for me —to possess an Illusion that shall take Paris by storm. I am told that there is nothing produced to-day fit to hold a candle to the former 'Miracles Bourjac.' Will you help me? Will you design for me the most wonderful Illusion of your life?"

"Mademoiselle," said Bourjac, with a shrug, "I have retired."

"I implore you!" she urged. "But I have not finished; I am poor, I am employed at a milliner's, I could not pay down a single franc. My offer is a share of my salary as a star. I am mad for the stage. It is not the money that I crave for, but the applause. I would not grudge you even half my salary! Oh, monsieur, it is in your power to lift me from despair into paradise. Say you consent."

Bourjac mused. Her offer was very funny; if she had been of the ordinary type, he would have sent her packing, with a few commercial home-truths. Excitement had brought a flush to the oval face, her glorious eyes awoke in him emotions which he had believed extinct. She was so captivating that he cast about him for phrases to prolong the interview. Though he could not agree, he didn't want her to go yet.

And when she did rise at last, he murmured, "Well, well, see me again and we will talk about it. I have no wish to be hard, you understand."

Her name was Laure. She was in love with a conjurer, a common, flashy fellow, who gave his mediocre exhibitions of legerdemain at such places as Le Jardin Extérieur, and had recently come to lodge at her mother's. She aspired to marry him, but did not dare to expect it. Her homage was very palpable, and monsieur Eugène Legrand, who had no matrimonial intentions, would often wish that the old woman did not keep such a sharp eye upon her.

Needless to say, Bourjac's semi-promise sent her home enraptured. She had gone to him on impulse, without giving her courage time to take flight; now, in looking back, she wondered at her audacity, and that she had gained so much as she had. "I have no wish to be hard," he had said. Oh, the old rascal admired her hugely! If she coaxed enough, he would end by giving in. What thumping luck! She determined to call upon him again on Sunday, and to look her best.

Bourjac, however, did not succumb on Sunday. Fascinating as he found her, he squirmed at the prospect of the task demanded of him. His workshop in the garden had been closed so long that rats had begun to regard it as their playroom; the more he contemplated resuming his profession, the less inclined he felt to do it.

She paid him many visits and he became deeply infatuated with her; yet he continued to maintain that he was past such an undertaking—that she had applied to him too late.

Then, one day, after she had flown into a passion, and wept, and been mollified, he said hesitatingly:

"I confess that an idea for an Illusion has occurred to me, but I do not pledge myself to execute it. I should call it 'A Life.' An empty cabinet is examined; it is supported by four columns—there is no stage trap, no obscurity, no black velvet curtain concealed in the dark, to screen the operations; the cabinet is raised high above the ground, and the lights are full up. You understand?" Some of the inventor's enthusiasm had crept into his voice. "You understand?"

"Go on," she said, holding her breath.

"Listen. The door of the cabinet is slammed, and in letters of fire there appears on it, 'Scene I.' Instantly it flies open again and discloses a baby. The baby moves, it wails—in fine, it is alive. Slam! Letters of fire, 'Scene II.' Instantly the baby has vanished; in its place is a beautiful girl—you! You smile triumphantly at your reflection in a mirror, your path is strewn with roses, the world is at your feet. Slam! 'Scene III.' In a moment twenty years have passed; your hair is grey, you are matronly, stout, your face is no longer oval; yet unmistakably it is you yourself, the same woman. Slam! 'Scene IV.' You are enfeebled, a crone, toothless, tottering on a stick. Once more! It is the last effect—the door flies open and reveals a skeleton."

"You can make this?" she questioned.

"I could make it if I chose," he answered.

"Will you?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On you!"

"Take any share you want," she cried. "I will sign anything you like! After all, would not the success be due to you?"

"So you begin to see that?" said the old man drily. "But, I repeat, it depends! In spite of everything, you may think my terms too high."

"What do you want me to do?" she stammered.

"Marry me!" said Bourjac.

He did not inquire if she had any affection for him; he knew that if she said "Yes" it would be a lie. But he adored this girl, who, of a truth, had nothing but her beauty to recommend her, and he persuaded himself that his devotion would evoke tenderness in her by degrees. She found the price high indeed. Not only was she young enough to be his granddaughter—she had given her fancy to another man. Immediately she could not consent. When she took leave of him, it was understood that she would think the offer over; and she went home and let Legrand hear that Bourjac had proposed for her hand. If, by any chance, the news piqued Legrand into doing likewise——?

But Legrand said nothing to the point. Though he was a little chagrined by the intelligence, it never even entered his mind to attempt to cut the inventor out. How should it? She was certainly an attractive girl, but as to marrying her—— He thought Bourjac a fool. As for himself, if he married at all, it would be an artist who was drawing a big salary and who would be able to provide him with some of the good things of life. "I pray you will be very happy, mademoiselle," he said, putting on a sentimental air.

So, after she had cried with mortification, Laure promised to be old Bourjac's wife.

A few weeks later they were married; and in that lonely little cottage she would have been bored to death but for the tawdry future that she foresaw. The man's dream of awakening her tenderness was speedily dispelled; he had been accepted as the means to an end, and he was held fast to the compact. She grudged him every hour in which he idled by her side. Driven from her arms by her impatience, old Bourjac would toil patiently in the workroom: planning, failing—surmounting obstacles atom by atom, for the sake of a woman whose sole interest in his existence was his progress with the Illusion that was to gratify her vanity.

He worshipped her still. If he had not worshipped her, he would sooner or later have renounced the scheme as impracticable; only his love for her supported him in the teeth of the impediments that arose. Of these she heard nothing. For one reason, her interest was so purely selfish that she had not even wished to learn how the cabinet was to be constructed. "All those figures gave her a headache," she declared. For another, when early in the winter he had owned himself at a deadlock, she had sneered at him as a duffer who was unable to fulfil his boasts. Old Bourjac never forgot that—his reputation was very dear to him—he did not speak to her of his difficulties again.

But they often talked of the success she was to achieve. She liked to go into a corner of the parlour and rehearse the entrance that she would make to acknowledge the applause. "It will be the great moment," she would say, "when I re-appear as myself and bow."

"No, it will be expected; that will not surprise anybody," Bourjac would insist. "The climax, the last effect, will be the skeleton!"

It was the skeleton that caused him the most anxious thought of all. In order to compass it, he almost feared that he would be compelled to sacrifice one of the preceding scenes. The babe, the girl, the matron, the crone, for all these his mechanism provided; but the skeleton, the "last effect," baffled his ingenuity. Laure began to think his task eternal.

Ever since the wedding, she had dilated proudly to her mother and Legrand on her approaching début, and it angered her that she could never say when the début was to be. Now that there need be no question of his marrying her, Legrand's manner towards her had become more marked. She went to the house often. One afternoon, when she rang, the door was opened by him; he explained that the old woman was out marketing.

Laure waited in the kitchen, and the conjurer sat on the table, talking to her.

"How goes the Illusion?" he asked.

"Oh, big!" she said. "It's going to knock them, I can tell you!" Her laugh was rather derisive. "It's a rum world; the shop-girl will become an artist, with a show that draws all Paris. We expect to open at the Folies-Bergère." She knew that Legrand could never aspire to an engagement at the Folies-Bergère as long as he lived.

"I hope you will make a hit," he said, understanding her resentment perfectly.

"You did not foresee me a star turn, hein?"

He gave a shrug. "How could I foresee? If you had not married Bourjac, of course it would not have happened?"

"I suppose not," she murmured. She was sorry he realised that; she would have liked him to feel that she might have had the Illusion anyhow, and been a woman worth his winning.

"Indeed," added Legrand pensively, rolling a cigarette, "you have done a great deal to obtain a success. It is not every girl who would go to such lengths."

"What?" She coloured indignantly.

"I mean it is not every girl who would break the heart of a man who loved her."

They looked in each other's eyes for a moment. Then she turned her head scornfully away.

"Why do you talk rot to me? Do you take me for a kid?"

He decided that a pained silence would be most effective.

"If you cared about me, why didn't you say so?" she flashed, putting the very question he had hoped for.

"Because my position prevented it," he sighed.

"I could not propose, a poor devil like me! Do I lodge in an attic from choice? But you are the only woman I ever wanted for my wife."

After a pause, she said softly, "I never knew you cared."

"I shall never care for anybody else," he answered. And then her mother came in with the vegetables.

It is easy to believe what one wishes, and she wished to believe Legrand's protestations. She began to pity herself profoundly, feeling that she had thrown away the substance for the shadow. In the sentimentality to which she yielded, even the prospect of being a star turn failed to console her; and during the next few weeks she invented reasons for visiting at her mother's more frequently than ever.

After these visits, Legrand used to smirk to himself in his attic. He reflected that the turn would, probably, earn a substantial salary for a long time to come. If he persuaded her to run away with him when the show had been produced, it would be no bad stroke of business for him! Accordingly, in their conversations, he advised her to insist on the Illusion being her absolute property.

"One can never tell what may occur," he would say. "If the managers arranged with Bourjac, not with you, you would always be dependent on your husband's whims for your engagements." And, affecting unconsciousness of his real meaning, the woman would reply, "That's true; yes, I suppose it would be best—yes, I shall have all the engagements made with *me*."

But by degrees even such pretences were dropped between them; they spoke plainly. He had the audacity to declare that it tortured him to think of her in old Bourjac's house—old Bourjac who plodded all day to minister to her caprice! She, no less shameless, acknowledged that her loneliness there was almost unendurable. So Legrand used to call upon her, to cheer her solitude, and while Bourjac laboured in the workroom, the lovers lolled in the parlour, and talked of the future they would enjoy together when his job was done.

"See, monsieur—your luncheon!" mumbled Margot, carrying a tray into the workroom on his busiest days.

"And madame, has madame her luncheon?" shouted Bourjac. Margot was very deaf indeed.

"Madame entertains monsieur Legrand again," returned the housekeeper, who was not blind as well.

Bourjac understood the hint, and more than once he remonstrated with his wife. But she looked in his eyes and laughed suspicion out of him for the time: "Eugène was an old friend, whom she had known from childhood! Enfin, if Jean objected, she would certainly tell him not to come so often. It was very ridiculous, however!"

And afterwards she said to Legrand, "We must put up with him in the meanwhile; be patient, darling! We shall not have to worry about what he thinks much longer."

Then, as if to incense her more, Bourjac was attacked by rheumatism before the winter finished; he could move only with the greatest difficulty, and took to his bed. Day after day he lay there, and she fumed at the sight of him, passive under the blankets, while his work was at a standstill.

More than ever the dulness got on her nerves now, especially as Legrand had avoided the house altogether since the complaint about the frequency of his visits. He was about to leave Paris to fulfil some engagements in the provinces. It occurred to her that it would be a delightful change to accompany him for a week. She had formerly had an aunt living in Rouen, and she told Bourjac that she had been invited to stay with her for a few days.

Bourjac made no objection. Only, as she hummed gaily over her packing, he turned his old face to the wall to hide his tears.

Her luggage was dispatched in advance, and by Legrand's counsel, it was labelled at the last minute with an assumed name. If he could have done so without appearing indifferent to her society, Legrand would have dissuaded her from indulging in the trip, for he had resolved now to be most circumspect until the Illusion was inalienably her own. As it was, he took all the precautions possible. They would travel separately; he was to depart in the evening, and Laure would follow by the next train. When she arrived, he would be awaiting her.

With the removal of her trunk, her spirits rose higher still. But the day passed slowly. At dusk she sauntered about the sitting-room, wishing that it were time for her to start. She had not seen Legrand since the previous afternoon, when they had met at a café to settle the final details. When the clock struck again, she reckoned that he must be nearly at his destination; perhaps he was there already, pacing the room as she paced this one? She laughed. Not a tinge of remorse discoloured the pleasure of her outlook—her "au revoir" to her husband was quite careless. The average woman who sins longs to tear out her conscience for marring moments which would otherwise be perfect. This woman had absolutely no conscience.

The shortest route to the station was by the garden gate; as she raised the latch, she was amazed to see Legrand hurriedly approaching.

"Thank goodness, I have caught you!" he exclaimed—"I nearly went round to the front."

"What has happened?"

"Nothing serious; I am not going, that is all—they have changed my date. The matter has been uncertain all day, or I would have let you know earlier. It is lucky I was in time to prevent your starting."

She was dumb with disappointment.

"It is a nuisance about your luggage," he went on; "we must telegraph about it. Don't look so down in the mouth—we shall have our trip next week instead."

"What am I to say to Jean—he will think it so strange? I have said good-bye to him."

"Oh, you can find an excuse—you 'missed your train.' Come out for half an hour, and we can talk." His glance fell on the workroom. "Is that fastened up?"

"I don't know. Do you want to see what he has done?"

"I may as well." He had never had an opportunity before—Bourjac had always been in there.

"No, it isn't locked," she said; "come on then! Wait till I have shut it after us before you strike a match—Margot might see the light."

A rat darted across their feet as they lit the lamp, and he dropped the matchbox. "Ugh!"

"The beastly things!" she shivered. "Make haste!"

On the floor stood a cabinet that was not unlike a gloomy wardrobe in its outward aspect. Legrand examined it curiously.

"Too massive," he remarked. "It will cost a fortune for carriage—and where are the columns I heard of?" He stepped inside and sounded the walls. "Humph, of course I see his idea. The fake is a very old one, but it is always effective." Really, he knew nothing about it, but as he was a conjurer, she accepted him as an authority.

"Show me! Is there room for us both?" she said, getting in after him. And as she got in, the door slammed.

Instantaneously they were in darkness, black as pitch, jammed close together. Their four hands flew all over the door at once, but they could touch no handle. The next moment, some revolving apparatus that had been set in motion, flung them off their feet. Round and round it swirled, striking against their bodies and their faces. They grovelled to escape it, but in that awful darkness their efforts were futile; they could not even see its shape.

"Stop it!" she gasped.

"I don't know how," he panted.

After a few seconds the whir grew fainter, the gyrations stopped automatically. She wiped the blood from her face, and burst into hysterical weeping. The man, cursing horribly, rapped to find the spring that she must have pressed as she entered. It seemed to them both that there could be no spot he did not rap a thousand times, but the door never budged.

His curses ceased; he crouched by her, snorting with fear.

"What shall we do?" she muttered.

He did not answer her.

"Eugène, let us stamp! Perhaps the spring is in the floor."

Still he paid no heed—he was husbanding his breath. When a minute had passed, she felt his chest distend, and a scream broke from him—"*Help!*"

"Mon Dieu!" She clutched him, panic-stricken. "We mustn't be found here, it would ruin everything. Feel for the spring! Eugène, feel for the spring, don't call!"

"*Help!*"

"Don't you understand? Jean will guess—it will be the end of my hopes, I shall have no career!"

"I have myself to think about!" he whimpered. And pushing away her arms, he screamed again and again. But there was no one to hear him, no neighbours, no one passing in the fields—none but old Bourjac, and deaf Margot, beyond earshot, in the house.

The cabinet was, of course, ventilated, and the danger was, not suffocation, but that they would be jammed here while they slowly starved to death. Soon her terror of the fate grew all-powerful in the woman, and, though she loathed him for having been the first to call, she, too, shrieked constantly for help now. By turns, Legrand would yell, distraught, and heave himself helplessly against the door—they were so huddled that he could bring no force to bear upon it.

In their black, pent prison, like a coffin on end, the night held a hundred hours. The match-box lay outside, where it had fallen, and though they could hear his watch ticking in his pocket, they were unable to look at it. After the watch stopped, they lost their sense of time altogether; they disputed what day of the week it was.

Their voices had been worn to whispers now; they croaked for help.

In the workroom, the rats missed the remains of old Bourjac's luncheons; the rats squeaked ravenously. . . . As she strove to scream, with the voice that was barely audible, she felt that she could resign herself to death were she but alone. She could not stir a limb or draw a breath apart from the man. She craved at last less ardently for life than for space—the relief of escaping, even for a single moment, from the oppression of contact. It became horrible, the contact, as revolting as if she had never loved him. The ceaseless contact maddened her. The quaking of his body, the clamminess of his flesh, the smell of his person, poisoning the darkness, seemed to her the eternities of Hell.

Bourjac lay awaiting his wife's return for more than a fortnight. Then he sent for her mother, and learnt that the " aunt in Rouen " had been buried nearly three years.

The old man was silent.

" It is a coincidence," added the visitor hesitatingly, " that monsieur Legrand has also disappeared. People are always ringing my bell to inquire where he is."

As soon as he was able to rise, Bourjac left for Paris; and, as the shortest route to the station was by the garden gate, he passed the workroom on his way. He nodded, thinking of the time that he had wasted there, but he did not go inside—he was too impatient to find Laure, and, incidentally, to shoot Legrand.

Though his quest failed, he never went back to the cottage; he could not have borne to live in it now. He tried to let it, but the little house was not everybody's money, and it stood empty for many years; indeed, before it was reoccupied Bourjac was dead and forgotten.

When the new owners planned their renovations, they had the curiosity to open a mildewed cabinet in an outhouse, and uttered a cry of dismay. Not until then was the "last effect" attained; but there were two skeletons, instead of one.

# AN INVITATION TO DINNER

THE creators of Eau d'Enfer invited designs for a poster calling the attention of the world to their liqueur's incomparable qualities. It occurred to Théodose Goujaud that this was a first-class opportunity to demonstrate his genius.

For an article with such a glistering name it was obvious that a poster must be flamboyant—one could not advertise a " Water of Hell " by a picture of a village maiden plucking cowslips—and Goujaud passed wakeful nights devising a sketch worthy of the subject. He decided at last upon a radiant brunette sharing a bottle of the liqueur with his Satanic Majesty while she sat on his knee.

But where was the girl to be found? Though his acquaintance with the models of Paris was extensive, he could think of none with a face to satisfy him. One girl's arms wreathed themselves before his mind, another girl's feet were desirable, but the face, which was of supreme importance, eluded his most frenzied search.

"Mon Dieu," groaned Goujaud, "here I am projecting a poster that would conquer Paris, and my scheme is frustrated by the fact that Nature fails to produce women equal to the heights of my art! It is such misfortunes as this that support the Morgue."

"I recommend you to travel," said Tricotrin; "a tour in the East might yield your heart's desire."

"It's a valuable suggestion," rejoined Goujaud; "I should like a couple of new shirts also, but I lack the money to acquire them."

"Well," said Tricotrin, "the Ball of the Willing Hand is nearer. Try that!"

Goujaud looked puzzled. "The Ball of the Willing Hand?" he repeated; "I do not know any Ball of the Willing Hand."

"Is it possible?" cried the poet; "where do you live? Why, the Willing Hand, my recluse, is the most fascinating resort in Paris. I have been familiar with it for fully a week. It is a bal de barrière where the criminal classes enjoy their brief leisure. Every Saturday night they frisk. The Cut-throats' Quadrille is a particularly sprightly measure, and the damsels there are often striking."

"And their escorts, too—if one of the willing hands planted a knife in my back, there would be no sprightliness about *me!*"

"In the interests of art one must submit to a little annoyance. Come, if you are conscientious I will introduce you to the place, and give you a few hints. For example, the company have a prejudice against collars, and, assuming for a moment that you possessed more than a franc, you would do well to leave the surplus at home."

Goujaud expanded his chest.

"As a matter of fact," he announced languidly, "I possess five hundred francs." And so dignified was his air that Tricotrin came near to believing him.

"You possess five hundred francs? You? How? No, such things do not occur! Besides, you mentioned a moment since that you were short of shirts."

"It is true that I am short of shirts, but, nevertheless, I have five hundred francs in my pocket. It is like this. My father, who is not artistic, has always desired to see me renounce my profession and sink to commerce. Well, I was at the point of yielding—man cannot live by hope alone, and my pictures were strangely unappreciated. Then, while consent trembled on my lips, up popped this Eau d'Enfer! I saw my opportunity, I recognised that, of all men in Paris, I was the best qualified to execute the poster. You may divine the sequel? I addressed my father with burning eloquence, I persuaded him to supply me with the means to wield my brush for a few months longer. If my poster succeeds, I become a celebrity. If it fails, I become a pétrole merchant. This summer decides my fate. In the meanwhile I am a capitalist; but it would be madness for me to purchase shirts, for I shall require every sou to support existence until the poster is acclaimed."

"You have a practical head!" exclaimed Tricotrin admiringly; "I foresee that you will go far. Let us trust that the Willing Hand will prove the ante-chamber to your immortality."

"I have no faith in your Willing Hand," demurred the painter; "the criminal classes are not keen on sitting for their portraits—the process has unpleasant associations to them. Think again! I can spare half an hour this morning. Evolve a further inspiration on the subject!"

"Do you imagine I have nothing to do but to provide you with a model? My time is fully occupied; I am engaged upon a mystical play, which is to be called *The Spinster's Prayer or the Goblin Child's Mother*, and take Paris by storm. A propos—yes, now I come to think of it, there is something in *Comœdia* there that might suit you."

"My preserver!" returned Goujaud. "What is it?"

Tricotrin picked the paper up and read:

WANTED: A Hundred Ladies for the Stage.—Beauty more essential than talent. No dilapidations need apply. *Agence* Lavalette, rue Baba, Thursday, 12 to 5."

"Mon Dieu! Now you are beginning to talk," said Goujaud. "A hundred! One among them should be suitable, hein? But, all the same——" He hesitated. "'Twelve to five'! It will be a shade monotonous standing on a doorstep from twelve to five, especially if the rain streams."

"Do you expect a Cleopatra to call at your attic, or to send an eighty horse-power automobile, that you may cast your eye over her? Anyhow, there may be a café opposite; you can order a bock on the terrace, and make it last."

"You are right. I shall go and inspect the spot at once. A hundred beauties! I declare the advertisement might have been framed to meet my wants. How fortunate that you chanced to see it! To-morrow evening you shall hear the result—dine with me at the Bel Avenir at eight o'clock. For one occasion I undertake to go a buster, I should be lacking in gratitude if I neglected to stuff you to the brim."

"Oh, my dear chap!" said Tricotrin. "The invitation is a godsend, I have not viewed the inside of a restaurant for a week. While our pal Pitou is banqueting with his progenitors in Chartres, *I* have even exhausted my influence with the fishmonger—I did not so much as see my way to a nocturnal herring in the garret. Mind you are not late. I shall come prepared to do justice to your hospitality, I promise you."

"Right, cocky!" said the artist. And he set forth, in high spirits, to investigate the rue Baba.

He was gratified to discover a café in convenient proximity to the office. And twelve o'clock had not sounded next day when he took a seat at one of the little white-topped tables, his gaze bent attentively upon the agent's step.

For the earliest arrival he had not long to wait. A dumpy girl with an enormous nose approached, swinging her *sac à main*. She cast a complacent glance at the name on the door, opened the bag, whipped out a powder-puff, and vanished.

"Morbleu!" thought the painter. "If she is a fair sample, I have squandered the price of a bock!" He remained in a state of depression for two or three minutes, and then the girl reappeared, evidently in a very bad temper.

"Ah!" he mused, rubbing his hands. "Monsieur Lavalette is plainly a person of his word. No beauty, no engagement! This is going to be all right. Where is the next applicant? A sip to Venus!"

Venus, however, did not irradiate the street yet. The second young woman was too short in the back, and at the sight of her features he shook his head despondently. "No good, my dear," he said to himself. "Little as you suspect it, there is a disappointment for you inside, word of honour! Within three minutes, I shall behold you again."

And, sure enough, she made her exit promptly, looking as angry as the other.

"I am becoming a dramatic prophet!" soliloquised Goujaud; "if I had nothing more vital to do, I might win drinks, betting on their chances, with the proprietor of the café. However, I grow impatient for the bevy of beauty—it is a long time on the road."

As if in obedience to his demand, girls now began to trip into the rue Baba so rapidly that he was kept busy regarding them. By twos, and threes, and in quartettes they tripped—tall girls, little girls, plain girls, pretty girls, girls shabby, and girls chic. But though many of them would have made agreeable partners at a dance, there was none who possessed the necessary qualifications for The Girl on Satan's Knee. He rolled a cigarette, and blew a pessimistic puff. "Another day lost!" groaned Goujaud. "All is over, I feel it. Posterity will never praise my poster, the clutch of Commerce is upon me—already the smell of the pétrole is in my nostrils!"

And scarcely had he said it when his senses reeled.

For, stepping from a cab, disdainfully, imperially, was his Ideal. Her hair, revealing the lobes of the daintiest ears that ever listened to confessions of love, had the gleam of purple grapes. Her eyes were a mystery, her mouth was a flower, her neck was an intoxication. So violently was the artist affected that, during several moments, he forgot his motive for being there. To be privileged merely to contemplate her was an ecstasy. While he sat transfixed with admiration, her dainty foot graced the agent's step, and she entered.

Goujaud caught his breath, and rose. The cab had been discharged. Dared he speak to her when she came out? It would be a different thing altogether from speaking to the kind of girl that he had foreseen. But to miss such a model for lack of nerve, that would be the regret of a lifetime! Now the prospect of the poster overwhelmed him, and he felt that he would risk any rebuff, commit any madness to induce her to "sit."

The estimate that he had, by this time, formed of monsieur Lavalette's taste convinced him that her return would not be yet. He sauntered to and fro, composing a preliminary and winning phrase. What was his surprise, after a very few seconds, to see that she had come out already, and was hastening away!

He overtook her in a dozen strides, and with a bow that was eloquent of his homage, exclaimed:

"Mademoiselle!"

"Hein?" she said, turning. "Oh, it's all right—there are too many people there; I've changed my mind, I shan't wait."

He understood that she took him for a minion of the agent's, and he hesitated whether to correct her mistake immediately. However, candour seemed the better course.

"I do not bring a message from monsieur Lavalette, mademoiselle," he explained.

"No?"

"No."

"What then?"

"I have ventured to address you on my own account—on a matter of the most urgent importance."

"I have no small change," she said curtly, making to pass.

"Mademoiselle!" His outraged dignity was superb. "You mistake me first for an office-boy, and then for a beggar. I am a man of means, though my costume may be unconventional. My name is Théodose Goujaud."

Her bow intimated that the name was not significant; but her exquisite eyes had softened at the reference to his means.

"For weeks I have been seeking a face for a picture that I have conceived," he went on; "a face of such peculiar beauty that I despaired of finding it! I had the joy to see you enter the agency, and I waited, trembling with the prayer that I might persuade you to come to my aid. Mademoiselle, will you do me the honour to allow me to reproduce the magic of your features on my canvas? I entreat it of you in the sacred name of Art!"

During this appeal, the lady's demeanour had softened more still. A faint smile hovered on her lips; her gaze was half gratified, half amused.

"Oh, you're a painter?" she said; "you want me to sit to you for the Salon? I don't know, I'm sure."

"It is not precisely for the Salon," he acknowledged. "But I am absorbed by the scheme—it will be the crown of my career. I will explain. It is a long story. If—if we could sit down?"

"Where?"

"There appears to be a café close to the agency," said Goujaud timidly.

"Oh!" She dismissed the café's pretensions with her eyebrows.

"You are right," he stammered. "Now that I look at it again, I see that it is quite a common place. Well, will you permit me to walk a little way with you?"

"We will go to breakfast at Armenonville, if you like," she said graciously, "where you can explain to me at your leisure."

It seemed to Goujaud that his heart dropped into his stomach and turned to a cannon-ball there. Armenonville? What would such a breakfast cost? Perhaps a couple of louis? Never in his life had he contemplated breakfasting at Armenonville.

She smiled, as if taking his consent for granted. Her loveliness and air of fashion confused him dreadfully. And if he made excuses, there would be no poster! Oh, he must seize the chance at any price!

"Of course — I shall be enchanted," he mumbled. And before he half realised that the unprecedented thing had happened they were rattling away, side by side in a fiacre.

It was astounding, it was breathless, it was an episode out of a novel! But Goujaud felt too sick, in thinking of the appalling expense, to enjoy his sudden glory. Accustomed to a couple of louis providing meals for three weeks, he was stupefied by the imminence of scattering the sum in a brief half-hour. Even the cab fare weighed upon him; he not infrequently envied the occupants of omnibuses.

It was clear that the lady herself was no stranger to the restaurant. While he blinked bewildered on the threshold, she was referring to her "pet table," and calling a waiter "Jules." The menu was a fresh embarrassment to the bohemian, but she, and the deferential waiter, relieved him of that speedily, and in five minutes an epicurean luncheon had been ordered, and he was gulping champagne.

It revived his spirits. Since he had tumbled into the adventure of his life, by all means let him savour the full flavour of it! His companion's smiles had become more frequent, her eyes were more transcendental still.

"How funnily things happen!" she remarked presently. "I had not the least idea of calling on Lavalette when I got up this morning. If I had not had a tiff with somebody, and decided to go on the stage to spite him, I should never have met you."

"Oh, you are not on the stage yet, then?"

"No. But I have often thought about it, and the quarrel determined me. So I jumped into a cab, drove off, and then—well, there was such a crowd of girls there, and they looked so vulgar; I changed my mind."

"Can an angel quarrel?" demanded Goujaud sentimentally. "I cannot imagine you saying an angry word to anyone."

"Oh!" she laughed. "Can't I, though! I'm a regular demon when I'm cross. People shouldn't vex me."

"Certainly not," he agreed. "And no one but a brute would do so. Besides, some women are attractive even in a rage. On the whole, I think I should like to see you in a rage with *me*, providing always that you 'made it up' as nicely as I should wish."

"Do you fancy that I could?" she asked, looking at the table-cloth.

"My head swims, in fancying!"

Her laughter rippled again, and her fascination was so intense that the poor fellow could scarcely taste a mouthful of his unique repast. "Talk to me," she commanded, "sensibly I mean! Where do you live?"

"I am living in the rue Ravignan."

"The rue Ravignan? Where is that?"

"Montmartre."

"Oh, really?" She seemed chilled. "It is not a very nice quarter in the daytime, is it?"

"My studio suits me," murmured Goujaud, perceiving his fall in her esteem. "For that reason I am reluctant to remove. An artist becomes very much attached to his studio. And what do I care for fashion, I? You may judge by my coat!"

"You're eccentric, aren't you?"

"Hitherto I have lived only for Art. But now I begin to realise that there may be something more potent and absorbing still."

"What is that?"

"Love!" added Goujaud, feeling himself the embodiment of all the heroes of romance.

"Oh?" Her glance mocked, encouraged. "I am dying to hear about your picture, though! What is the subject?"

"It is not exactly what you mean by a 'picture.'" He fiddled with his glass. "It is, in fact, a poster that I project."

"A poster?" she exclaimed. "And you ask *me* to—oh, no, I couldn't possibly!"

"Mademoiselle!"

"I really don't think I could. A poster? Ah, no!"

"To save me!" he implored. "Because my whole life depends on your decision!"

"How can a poster matter so much to you? The proposal is absurd." She regarded her pêche Melba with a frown.

"If you think of becoming an actress, remember what a splendid advertisement it would be!" he urged feverishly.

"Oh, flûte!" But she had wavered at that.

"All Paris would flock to your début. They would go saying, 'Can she be as beautiful as her portrait?' And they would come back saying, 'She is lovelier still!' Let me give you some more wine."

"No more; I'll have coffee, and a grand marnier—red."

"Doubtless the more expensive colour!" reflected Goujaud. But the time had passed for dwelling on minor troubles. "Listen," he resumed; "I shall tell you my history. You will then realise to what an abyss of despair your refusal will plunge me—to what effulgent heights I may be raised by your consent. You cannot be marble! My father——"

"Indeed, I am not marble," she put in. "I am instinct with sensibility—it is my great weakness."

"So much the better. Be weak to *me*. My father——"

"Oh, let us get out of this first!" she suggested. "You can talk to me as we drive."

And the attentive Jules presented the discreetly folded bill.

For fully thirty seconds the Pavillon d'Armenonville swirled round the unfortunate painter so violently that he felt as if he were on a roundabout at a fair. He feared that the siren must hear the pounding of his heart. To think that he had dreaded paying two louis! Two louis? Why, it would have been a bagatelle! Speechlessly he laid a fortune on the salver. With a culminating burst of recklessness he waved four francs towards Jules, and remarked that that personage eyed the tip with cold displeasure. "What a lucrative career, a waiter's!" moaned the artist; "he turns up his nose at four francs!"

Well, he had speculated too heavily to accept defeat now! Bracing himself for the effort, Goujaud besought the lady's help with such a flood of blandishment during the drive that more than once she seemed at the point of yielding. Only one difficult detail had he withheld—that he wished to pose her on the knee of Mephistopheles—and to propitiate her further, before breaking the news, he stopped the cab at a florist's.

She was so good-humoured and tractable after the florist had pillaged him that he could scarcely be callous when she showed him that she had split her glove. But, to this day, he protests that, until the glove-shop had been entered, it never occurred to him that it would be necessary to present her with more than one pair. As they came out—Goujaud moving beside her like a man in a trance—she gave a faint start.

"Mon Dieu!" she muttered. "There's my friend—he has seen us—I must speak to him, or he will think I am doing wrong. Wait a minute!" And a dandy, with a monocle, was, indeed, casting very supercilious glances at the painter.

At eight o'clock that evening, monsieur Tricotrin, with a prodigious appetite, sat in the Café du Bel Avenir, awaiting the arrival of his host. When impatience was mastering him, there arrived, instead, a petit bleu. The impecunious poet took it from the proprietress, paling, and read:

"I discovered my Ideal—she ruined, and then deserted me! To-morrow there will be a painter the less, and a pétrole merchant the more. Pardon my non-appearance—I am spending my last sous on this message."

"Monsieur will give his order now?" inquired the proprietress.

"Er—thank you, I do not dine to-night," said Tricotrin.

## THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS

In the summer of the memorable year ——, but the date doesn't matter, Robichon and Quinquart both paid court to mademoiselle Brouette. Mademoiselle Brouette was a captivating actress, Robichon and Quinquart were the most comic of comedians, and all three were members of the Théâtre Suprême.

Robichon was such an idol of the public's that they used to laugh before he uttered the first word of his rôle; and Quinquart was so vastly popular that his silence threw the audience into convulsions.

Professional rivalry apart, the two were good friends, although they were suitors for the same lady, and this was doubtless due to the fact that the lady favoured the robust Robichon no more than she favoured the skinny Quinquart. She flirted with them equally, she approved them equally—and at last, when each of them had plagued her beyond endurance, she promised in a pet that she would marry the one that was the better actor.

Tiens! Not a player on the stage, not a critic on the Press could quite make up his mind which the better actor was. Only Suzanne Brouette could have said anything so tantalising.

"But how shall we decide the point, Suzanne?" stammered Robichon helplessly. "Whose pronouncement will you accept?"

"How can the question be settled?" queried Quinquart, dismayed. "Who shall be the judge?"

"Paris shall be the judge," affirmed Suzanne. "We are the servants of the public—I will take the public's word!"

Of course she was as pretty as a picture, or she couldn't have done these things.

Then poor Quinquart withdrew, plunged in reverie. So did Robichon. Quinquart reflected that she had been talking through her expensive hat. Robichon was of the same opinion. The public lauded them both, was no less generous to one than to the other—to wait for the judgment of Paris appeared equivalent to postponing the matter *sine die*. No way out presented itself to Quinquart. None occurred to Robichon.

"Mon vieux," said the latter, as they sat on the terrace of their favourite café a day or two before the annual vacation, "let us discuss this amicably. Have a cigarette! You are an actor, therefore you consider yourself more talented than I. I, too, am an actor, therefore I regard you as less gifted than myself. So much for our artistic standpoints! But we are also men of the world, and it must be obvious to both of us that we might go on being funny until we reached our death-beds without demonstrating the supremacy of either. Enfin, our only hope lies in versatility—the conqueror must distinguish himself in a solemn part!" He viewed the other with complacence, for the quaint Quinquart had been designed for a droll by Nature.

"Right!" said Quinquart. He contemplated his colleague with satisfaction, for it was impossible to fancy the fat Robichon in tragedy.

"I perceive only one drawback to the plan," continued Robichon, "the Management will never consent to accord us a chance. Is it not always so in the theatre? One succeeds in a certain line of business and one must be resigned to play that line as long as one lives. If my earliest success had been scored as a villain of melodrama, it would be believed that I was competent to enact nothing but villains of melodrama; it happened that I made a hit as a comedian, wherefore nobody will credit that I am capable of anything but being comic."

"Same here!" concurred Quinquart. "Well, then, what do you propose?"

Robichon mused. "Since we shall not be allowed to do ourselves justice on the stage, we must find an opportunity off it!"

"A private performance? Good! Yet, if

it is a private performance, how is Paris to be the judge ? "

" Ah," murmured Robichon, " that is certainly a stumbling-block."

They sipped their apéritifs moodily. Many heads were turned towards the little table where they sat. " There are Quinquart and Robichon, how amusing they always are ! " said passers-by, little guessing the anxiety at the laughter-makers' hearts.

" What's to be done ? " sighed Quinquart at last.

Robichon shrugged his fat shoulders, with a frown.

Both were too absorbed to notice that, after a glance of recognition, one of the pedestrians had paused, and was still regarding them irresolutely. He was a tall, burly man, habited in rusty black, and the next moment, as if finding courage, he stepped forward and spoke :

" Gentlemen, I ask pardon for the liberty I take—impulse urges me to seek your professional advice ! I am in a position to pay a moderate fee. Will you permit me to explain myself ? "

" Monsieur," returned Robichon, " we are in deep consideration of our latest parts. We shall be pleased to give you our attention at some other time."

" Alas ! " persisted the newcomer, " with me time presses. I, too, am considering my latest part—and it will be the only speaking part I have ever played, though I have been 'appearing' for twenty years."

"What? You have been a super for twenty years?" said Quinquart, with a grimace.

"No, monsieur," replied the stranger grimly. "I have been the public executioner; and I am going to lecture on the horrors of the post I have resigned."

The two comedians stared at him aghast. Across the sunlit terrace seemed to have fallen the black shadow of the guillotine.

"I am Jacques Roux," the man went on. "I am 'trying it on the dog' at Appeville-sous-Bois next week, and I have what you gentlemen call 'stage fright'—I, who never knew what nervousness meant before! Is it not queer? As often as I rehearse walking on to the platform, I feel myself to be all arms and legs—I don't know what to do with them. Formerly, I scarcely remembered my arms and legs; but, of course, my attention used to be engaged by the other fellow's head. Well, it struck me that you might consent to give me a few hints in deportment. Probably one lesson would suffice."

"Sit down," said Robichon. "Why did you abandon your official position?"

"Because I awakened to the truth," Roux answered. "I no longer agree with capital punishment; it is a crime that should be abolished."

"The scruples of conscience, hein?"

"That is it."

"Fine!" said Robichon. "What dramatic lines such a lecture might contain! And of what is it to consist?"

"It is to consist of the history of my life—my youth, my poverty, my experiences as Executioner, and my remorse."

"Magnificent!" said Robichon. "The spectres of your victims pursue you even to the platform. Your voice fails you, your eyes start from your head in terror. You gasp for mercy—and imagination splashes your outstretched hands with gore. The audience thrill, women swoon, strong men are breathless with emotion." Suddenly he smote the table with his big fist, and little Quinquart nearly fell off his chair, for he divined the inspiration of his rival. "Listen!" cried Robichon, "are you known at Appeville-sous-Bois?"

"My name is known, yes."

"Bah! I mean are you known personally, have you acquaintances there?"

"Oh, no. But why?"

"There will be nobody to recognise you?"

"It is very unlikely in such a place."

"What do you estimate that your profits will amount to?"

"It is only a small hall, and the prices are cheap. Perhaps two hundred and fifty francs."

"And you are nervous, you would like to postpone your début?"

"I should not be sorry, I admit. But, again, why?"

"I will tell you why—I offer you five hundred francs to let me take your place!"

"Monsieur!"

"Is it a bargain?"

"I do not understand!"

"I have a whim to figure in a solemn part. You can explain next day that you missed your train—that you were ill, there are a dozen explanations that can be made; you will not be supposed to know that I personated you—the responsibility for that is mine. What do you say?"

"It is worth double the money," demurred the man.

"Not a bit of it! All the Press will shout the story of my practical joke—Paris will be astounded that I, Robichon, lectured as Jacques Roux and curdled an audience's blood. Millions will speak of your intended lecture tour who otherwise would never have heard of it. I am giving you the grandest advertisement, and paying you for it, besides. Enfin, I will throw a deportment lesson in! Is it agreed?"

"Agreed, monsieur!" said Roux.

Oh, the trepidation of Quinquart! Who could eclipse Robichon if his performance of the part equalled his conception of it? At the theatre that evening Quinquart followed Suzanne about the wings pathetically. He was garbed like a buffoon, but he felt like Romeo. The throng that applauded his capers were far from suspecting the romantic longings under his magenta wig. For the first time in his life he was thankful that the author hadn't given him more to do.

And, oh, the excitement of Robichon! He was to put his powers to a tremendous test, and if he made the effect that he anticipated he had no fear of Quinquart's going one better. Suzanne, to whom he whispered his project proudly, announced an intention of being present to "see the fun." Quinquart also promised to be there. Robichon sat up all night preparing his lecture.

If you wish to know whether Suzanne rejoiced at the prospect of his winning her, history is not definite on the point; but some chroniclers assert that at this period she made more than usual of Quinquart, who had developed a hump as big as the Panthéon.

And they all went to Appeville-sous-Bois.

Though no one in the town was likely to know the features of the Executioner, it was to be remembered that people there might know the actor's, and Robichon had made up to resemble Roux as closely as possible. Arriving at the humble hall, he was greeted by the lessee, heard that a "good house" was expected, and smoked a cigarette in the retiring-room while the audience assembled.

At eight o'clock the lessee reappeared.

"All is ready, monsieur Roux," he said.

Robichon rose.

He saw Suzanne and Quinquart in the third row, and was tempted to wink at them.

"Ladies and gentlemen——"

All eyes were riveted on him as he began; even the voice of the "Executioner" exercised a morbid fascination over the crowd. The men nudged their neighbours appreciatively, and women gazed at him, half horrified, half charmed.

The opening of his address was quiet enough—there was even a humorous element in it, as he narrated imaginary experiences of his boyhood. People tittered, and then glanced at one another with an apologetic air, as if shocked at such a monster's daring to amuse them. Suzanne whispered to Quinquart: "Too cheerful; he hasn't struck the right note." Quinquart whispered back gloomily: "Wait; he may be playing for the contrast!"

And Quinquart's assumption was correct. Gradually the cheerfulness faded from the speaker's voice, the humorous incidents were past. Gruesome, hideous, grew the anecdotes. The hall shivered. Necks were craned, and white faces twitched suspensively. He dwelt on the agonies of the Condemned, he recited crimes in detail, he mirrored the last moments before the blade fell. He shrieked his remorse, his lacerating remorse. "I am a murderer," he sobbed; and in the hall one might have heard a pin drop.

There was no applause when he finished—that set the seal on his success; he bowed and withdrew amid tense silence. Still none moved in the hall, until, with a rush, the representatives of the Press sped forth to proclaim Jacques Roux an unparalleled sensation.

The triumph of Robichon! How generous were the congratulations of Quinquart, and how sweet the admiring tributes of Suzanne! And there was another compliment to come—nothing less than a card from the marquis de Thevenin, requesting an interview at his home.

"Ah!" exclaimed Robichon, enravished, "an invitation from a noble! That proves the effect I made, hein?"

"Who may he be?" inquired Quinquart. "I never heard of the marquis de Thevenin!"

"It is immaterial whether you have heard of him," replied Robichon. "He is a marquis, and he desires to converse with me! It is an honour that one must appreciate. I shall assuredly go."

And, being a bit of a snob, he sought a fiacre in high feather.

The drive was short, and when the cab stopped he was distinctly taken aback to perceive the unpretentious aspect of the nobleman's abode. It was, indeed, nothing better than a lodging. A peasant admitted him, and the room to which he was ushered boasted no warmer hospitality than a couple of candles and a decanter of wine. However, the sconces were massive silver. Monsieur le marquis, he was informed, had been suddenly compelled to summon his physician, and begged that monsieur Roux would allow him a few minutes' grace.

Robichon ardently admired the candlesticks, but began to think he might have supped more cosily with Suzanne.

It was a long time before the door opened.

The marquis de Thevenin was old—so old that he seemed to be falling to pieces as he tottered forward. His skin was yellow and shrivelled, his mouth sunken, his hair sparse and grey; and from this weird face peered strange eyes—the eyes of a fanatic.

"Monsieur, I owe you many apologies for my delay," he wheezed. "My unaccustomed exertion this evening fatigued me, and on my return from the hall I found it necessary to see my doctor. Your lecture was wonderful, monsieur Roux—most interesting and instructive; I shall never forget it."

Robichon bowed his acknowledgments.

"Sit down, monsieur Roux, do not stand! Let me offer you some wine. I am forbidden to touch it myself. I am a poor host, but my age must be my excuse."

"To be the guest of monsieur le marquis," murmured Robichon, "is a privilege, an honour, which—er——"

"Ah," sighed the Marquis. "I shall very soon be in the Republic where all men are really equals and the only masters are the worms. My reason for requesting you to come was to speak of your unfortunate experiences—of a certain unfortunate experience in particular. You referred in your lecture to the execution of one called 'Victor Lesueur.' He died game, hein?"

"As plucky a soul as I ever dispatched!" said Robichon, savouring the burgundy.

"Ah! Not a tremor? He strode to the guillotine like a man?"

"Like a hero!" said Robichon, who knew nothing about him.

"That was fine," said the Marquis; "that was as it should be! You have never known a prisoner to die more bravely?" There was a note of pride in his voice that was unmistakable.

"I shall always recall his courage with respect," declared Robichon, mystified.

"Did you respect it at the time?"

"Pardon, monsieur le marquis?"

"I inquire if you respected it at the time; did you spare him all needless suffering?"

"There is no suffering," said Robichon. "So swift is the knife that——"

The host made a gesture of impatience. "I refer to mental suffering. Cannot you realise the emotions of an innocent man condemned to a shameful death?"

"Innocent! As for that, they all say that they are innocent."

"I do not doubt it. Victor, however, spoke the truth. I know it. He was my son."

"Your son?" faltered Robichon, aghast.

"My only son—the only soul I loved on earth. Yes; he was innocent, monsieur Roux. And it was you who butchered him—he died by your hands."

"I—I was but the instrument of the law," stammered Robichon. "I was not responsible for his fate, myself."

"You have given a masterly lecture, monsieur Roux," said the Marquis musingly; "I find myself in agreement with all that you said in it—'you are his murderer.' I hope the wine is to your taste, monsieur Roux? Do not spare it!"

"The wine?" gasped the actor. He started to his feet, trembling—he understood.

"It is poisoned," said the old man calmly. "In an hour you will be dead."

"Great Heavens!" moaned Robichon. Already he was conscious of a strange sensation—his blood was chilled, his limbs were weighted, there were shadows before his eyes.

"Ah, I have no fear of you!" continued the other; "I am feeble, I could not defend myself; but your violence would avail you nothing. Fight, or faint, as you please—you are doomed."

For some seconds they stared at each other dumbly—the actor paralysed by terror, the host wearing the smile of a lunatic. And then the "lunatic" slowly peeled court-plaster from his teeth, and removed features, and lifted a wig.

And when the whole story was published, a delighted Paris awarded the palm to Quinquart without a dissentient voice, for while Robichon had duped an audience, Quinquart had duped Robichon himself.

Robichon bought the silver candlesticks, which had been hired for the occasion, and he presented them to Quinquart and Suzanne on their wedding-day.

# THE FAIRY POODLE

THEY were called the "Two Children" because they were so unpractical; even in bohemia, where practicality is the last virtue to flourish, their improvidence was surprising; but really they were not children at all—they had been married for three years, though to watch their billing and cooing, you would have supposed them to be bride and bridegroom.

Julien and Juliette had fallen in love and run to the Mairie as joyously as if chateaubriands were to be gathered from the boughs in the Jardin des Buttes-Chaumont; and since then their home had been the studio under the slates, where they were often penniless. Indeed, if it had not been for the intermittent mercies of madame Cochard, the concierge, they would have starved under the slates. However, they were sure that the pictures which Julien painted would some day make him celebrated, and that the fairy-tales which Juliette weaved would some day be as famous as Hans Andersen's. So they laughed, and painted and scribbled, and spent their money on bonbons, instead of saving it for bread; and when they had no dinner, they would kiss each other, and say "There is a good time coming." And they were called the "Two Children," as you know.

But even the patience of madame Cochard was taxed when Juliette brought back the poodle.

She found him—a strayed, muddy, unhappy little poodle—in the rue de Rivoli one wet afternoon in November, and what more natural than that she should immediately bear him home, and propose to give him a bath, and adopt him? It was the most natural thing in the world, since she was Juliette, yet this madame Cochard, who objected to a dog on her stairs as violently as if it were a tiger, was furious.

"Is it not enough," she cried, "that you are the worst tenants in the house, you two—that you are always behindhand with your rent, and that I must fill your mouths out of my own purse? Is a concierge an Angel from Heaven, do you think, that you expect her to provide also for lost dogs?"

"Dear, kind madame Cochard," cooed Juliette, "you will learn to love the little creature as if it were your own child! See how trustfully he regards you!"

"It is a fact," added Julien; "he seems to take to her already! It is astonishing how quickly a dog recognises a good heart."

"Good heart, or not," exclaimed the concierge, "it is to be understood that I do not consent to this outrage. The poodle shall not remain!"

"Be discreet," urged Juliette, "I entreat you to be discreet, for your own sake; if you must have the whole truth, he is a fairy poodle!"

"What do you say?" ejaculated madame Cochard.

"He is a fairy poodle, and if we treat him ungenerously, we shall suffer. Remember the history of the Lodgers, the Concierge, and the Pug!"

"I have never heard of such a history," returned madame Cochard; "and I do not believe that there ever was one."

"She has never heard the history of the Lodgers, the Concierge, and the Pug!" cried Juliette. "Oh, then listen, madame! Once upon a time there were two lodgers, a young man and his wife, and they were so poor that often they depended on the tenderness of the concierge to supply them with a dinner."

"Did they also throw away their good money on bonbons and flowers?" asked madame Cochard, trying her utmost to look severe.

"It is possible," admitted Juliette, who was perched on the table, with the dirty little animal in her lap, "for though they are our hero and heroine, I cannot pretend that they were very wise. Well, this concierge, who suffered badly from lumbago and stairs, had sometimes a bit of temper, so you may figure yourself what a fuss she raised when the poor lodgers brought home a friendless pug to add to their embarrassments. However——"

"There is no 'however,'" persisted madame Cochard; "she raises a fuss, and that is all about it!"

"Pardon, dear madame," put in Julien, "you confuse the cases; we are now concerned with the veracious history of the pug, not the uncertain future of the poodle."

"Quite so," said Juliette. "She raised a terrible fuss and declared that the pug should go, but finally she melted to it and made it welcome. And then, what do you suppose happened? Why, it turned out to be an enchanted prince, who rewarded them all with wealth and happiness. The young man's pictures were immediately accepted by the Salon—did I mention that he was an artist? The young woman's stories—did I tell you that she wrote stories?—became so much the fashion that her head swam with joy; and the concierge—the dear, kind concierge—was changed into a beautiful princess, and never had to walk up any stairs again as long as she lived. Thus we see that one should never forbid lodgers to adopt a dog!"

"Thus we see that they do well to call you a pair of 'children,'" replied madame Cochard, "that is what we see! Well, well, keep the dog, since you are so much bent on it; only I warn you that if it gives me trouble, it will be sausages in no time! I advise you to wash it without delay, for a more deplorable little beast I never saw."

Julien and Juliette set to work with delight, and after he was bathed and dry, the alteration in the dog was quite astonishing. Although he did not precisely turn into a prince, he turned into a poodle of the most fashionable aspect. Obviously an aristocrat among poodles, a poodle of high estate. The metamorphosis was so striking that a new fear assailed his rescuers, the fear that it might be dishonest of them to retain him—probably some great lady was disconsolate at his loss!

Sure enough! A few days later, when Sanquereau called upon them, he said:

"By the way, did I not hear that you had found a poodle, my children? Doubtless it is the poodle for which they advertise. See!" And he produced a copy of a journal in which "a handsome reward" was promised for the restoration of an animal which resembled their protégé to a tuft.

The description was too accurate for the Children to deceive themselves, and that afternoon Juliette carried the dog to a magnificent house which was nothing less than the residence of the comtesse de Grand Ecusson.

She was left standing in a noble hall while a flunkey bore the dog away. Then another flunkey bade her follow him upstairs; and in a salon which was finer than anything that Juliette had ever met with outside the pages of a novel, the Countess was reclining on a couch with the poodle in her arms.

"I am so grateful to you for the recovery of my darling," said the great lady; "my distress has been insupportable. Ah, naughty, naughty Racine!" She made a pretence of chastising the poodle on the nose.

"I can understand it, madame," said Juliette, much embarrassed.

"Where did you find him? And has he been well fed, well taken care of? I hope he has not been sleeping in a draught?"

"Oh, indeed, madame, he has been nourished like a beloved child. Doubtless, not so delicately as with madame, but——"

"It was most kind of you," said the lady. "I count myself blessed that my little Racine fell into such good hands. Now as to the reward, what sum would you think sufficient?"

Juliette looked shy. "I thank you, madame, but we could not accept anything," she faltered.

"What?" exclaimed the Countess, raising her eyebrows in surprise, " you cannot accept anything? How is that? "

" Well," said Juliette, " it would be base to accept money for a simple act of honesty. It is true that we did not wish to part with the dog—we had grown to love him—but, as to our receiving payment for giving him up, that is impossible."

The Countess laughed merrily. " What a funny child you are! And, who are ' we '—you and your parents? "

" Oh no," said Juliette; " my parents are in heaven, madame; but I am married."

" Your husband must be in heaven, too! " said the Countess, who was a charming woman.

" Ah," demurred Juliette, " but although I have a warm heart, I have also a healthy appetite, and he is not rich; he is a painter."

" I must go to see his pictures some day," replied the comtesse de Grand Ecusson. " Give me the address—and believe that I am extremely grateful to you! "

It need not be said that Juliette skipped home on air after this interview. The hint of such patronage opened the gates of paradise to her, and the prospect was equally dazzling to Julien. For fully a week they talked of nothing but a visit from the comtesse de Grand Ecusson, having no suspicion that fine ladies often forgot their pretty promises as quickly as they made them.

And the week, and a fortnight, and a month passed, and at last the expectation faded; they ceased to indulge their fancies of a carriage-and-pair dashing into the street with a Lady Bountiful. And what was much more serious, madame Cochard ceased to indulge their follies. The truth was that she had never pardoned the girl for refusing to accept the proffered reward; the delicacy that prompted the refusal was beyond her comprehension, and now that the pair were in arrears with their rent again, she put no bridle on her tongue.

"It appears to me that it would have been more honourable to accept money for a poodle than to owe money to a landlord," she grunted. "It must be perfectly understood that if the sum is not forthcoming on the first of January, you will have to get out. I have received my instructions, and I shall obey them. On the first day of January, my children, you pay, or you go! Le bon Dieu alone knows what will become of you, but that is no affair of mine. I expect you will die like the babes in the wood, for you are no more fit to make a living than a cow is fit to fly."

"Dear madame Cochard," they answered, peacefully, "why distress yourself about us? The first of January is more than a week distant; in a week we may sell a picture, or some fairy tales—in a week many things may happen!"

And they sunned themselves on the boulevard the same afternoon with as much serenity as if they had been millionaires.

Nevertheless, they did not sell a picture or some fairy tales in the week that followed—and the first of January dawned with relentless punctuality, as we all remember.

In the early morning, when madame Cochard made her ascent to the attic—her arms folded inexorably, the glare of a creditor in her eye—she found that Juliette had already been out. (If you can believe me, she had been out to waste her last two francs on an absurd tie for Julien !)

" Eh bien," demanded the concierge sternly, " where is your husband ? I am here, as arranged, for the rent ; no doubt he has it ready on the mantelpiece for me ? "

" He is not in," answered Juliette coaxingly, " and I am sorry to say we have had disappointments. The fact is there is something wrong with the construction of a story of which I had immense hopes—it needs letting out at the waist, and a tuck put in at the hem. When I have made the alterations, I am sure it will fit some journal elegantly."

" All this passes forbearance ! " exclaimed madame Cochard. " Well, you have thoroughly understood, and all is said—you will vacate your lodging by evening ! So much grace I give you ; but at six o'clock you depart promptly, or you will be ejected! And do not reckon on me to send any meal up here during the day, for you will not get so much as a crust. What is it that you have been buying there?"

"It is a little gift for Julien; I rose early to choose it before he woke, and surprise him; but when I returned he was out."

"A gift?" cried the concierge. "You have no money to buy food, and you buy a gift for your husband! What for?"

"What for?" repeated Juliette wonderingly. "Why, because it is New Year's Day! And that reminds me—I wish you the compliments of the season, madame; may you enjoy many happy years!"

"Kind words pay no bills," snapped the concierge. "I have been lenient far too long—I have my own reputation to consider with the landlord. By six o'clock, bear in mind!" And then, to complete her resentment, what should happen but that Julien entered bearing a bouquet!

To see Julien present Juliette with the roses, and to watch Juliette enchant Julien with the preposterous tie, was as charming a little comedy of improvidence as you would be likely to meet with in a lifetime.

"Mon Dieu!" gasped madame Cochard, purple with indignation, "it is, indeed, well that you are leaving here, monsieur—a madhouse is the fitting address for you! You have nothing to eat, and you buy roses for your wife! What for?"

"What for?" echoed Julien, astonished. "Why, because it is New Year's Day! And I take the opportunity to wish you the compliments of the season, madame—may your future be as bright as Juliette's eyes!"

"By six o'clock!" reiterated the concierge, who was so exasperated that she could barely articulate. "By six o'clock you will be out of the place!" And to relieve her feelings, she slammed the door with such violence that half a dozen canvases fell to the floor.

"Well, this is a nice thing," remarked Julien, when she had gone. "It looks to me, mignonne, as if we shall sleep in the Bois, with the moon for an eiderdown."

"At least you shall have a comfy pillow, sweetheart," cried Juliette, drawing his head to her breast.

"My angel, there is none so soft in the Elysée. And as we have nothing for déjeuner in the cupboard, I propose that we breakfast now on kisses."

"Ah, Julien!" whispered the girl, as she folded him in her arms.

"Ah, Juliette!" It was as if they had been married that morning.

"And yet," continued the young man, releasing her at last, "to own the truth, your kisses are not satisfying as a menu; they are the choicest of hors d'œuvres—they leave one hungry for more."

They were still making love when Sanquereau burst in to wish them a Happy New Year.

"How goes it, my children?" he cried. "You look like a honeymoon, I swear! Am I in the way, or may I breakfast with you?"

"You are not in the way, mon vieux," returned Julien; "but I shall not invite you to breakfast with me, because my repast consists of Juliette's lips."

"Mon Dieu!" said Sanquereau. "So you are broke? Well, in my chequered career I have breakfasted on much worse fare than yours."

At this reply, Juliette blushed with all the bashfulness of a bride, and Julien endeavoured to assume the air of a man of the world.

"Tell me," he said; "we are in difficulties about the rent—have you by chance a louis that you could lend me?"

Sanquereau turned out his pockets, like the good fellow he was, but he could produce no more than a sou. "What a bother!" he cried. "I would lend you a louis if I had it as readily as a cigarette-paper, but you see how I am situated. On my honour, it rends my heart to have to refuse."

"You are a gallant comrade," said Julien, much touched. "Come back and sup with us this evening, and we will open the New Year with a festivity!"

"Hein? But there will be no supper," faltered Juliette.

"That's true," said Julien; "there will be no supper—I was forgetting. Still—who knows? There is plenty of time; I shall have an idea. Perhaps I may be able to borrow something from Tricotrin."

"I shall be enchanted," responded Sanquereau; "depend on my arrival! If I am not mistaken, I recognise Tricotrin's voice on the stairs."

His ears had not deceived him; Tricotrin appeared with Pitou at this very moment.

"Greeting, my children!" they cried. "How wags the world? May the New Year bring you laurels and lucre!"

"To you also, dear Gustave and Nicolas," cried the Children. "May your poems and your music ignite the Seine, and may Sanquereau rise to eminence and make statues of you both!"

"In the meantime," added Sanquereau, "can either of you put your hands on a few francs? There is a fine opening for them here."

"A difference of opinion exists between ourselves and the landlord," Julien explained; "we consider that he should wait for his rent, and he holds a different view. If you could lend us fifteen francs, we might effect a compromise."

The poet and the composer displayed the lining of their pockets as freely as the sculptor had done, but their capital proved to be a sou less than his own. Tears sprang to their eyes as they confessed their inability to be of use. "We are in despair," they groaned.

"My good, kind friends," exclaimed Julien, "your sympathy is a noble gift in itself! Join us in a little supper this evening in celebration of the date."

"We shall be delighted," declared Tricotrin and Pitou.

"But—but—" stammered Juliette again, "where is it to come from, this supper—and where shall we be by supper-time?"

"Well, our address is on the lap of the gods," admitted Julien, "but while there is life there is hope. Possibly I may obtain a loan from Lajeunie."

Not many minutes had passed before Lajeunie also paid a visit to the attic. "Aha," cried the unsuccessful novelist, as he perceived the company, "well met! My children, my brothers, may your rewards equal your deserts this year—may France do honour to your genius!"

"And may Lajeunie be crowned the New Balzac," shouted the assembly; "may his abode be in the Champs Elysées, and his name in the mouth of all the world!"

But, extraordinary as it appears, Lajeunie proved to be as impecunious as the rest there;

and he was so much distressed that Julien, deeply moved, said:

"Come back to supper, Lajeunie, we will drink toasts to the Muses!" And now there were four guests invited to the impracticable supper, and when the Children were left alone they clapped their hands at the prospect.

"How merry we shall be!" Julien exclaimed; "and awhile ago we talked of passing the night in the Bois! It only shows you that one can never tell what an hour may bring forth."

"Yes, yes," assented Juliette blithely. "And as for the supper——"

"We shall not require it till nine o'clock at the earliest."

"And now it is no more than midday. Why, there is an eternity for things to arrange themselves!"

"Just so. The sky may rain truffles in such an interval," said the painter. And they drew their chairs closer to the fire, and pretended to each other that they were not hungry.

The hours crept past, and the sunshine waned, and snow began to flutter over Paris. But no truffles fell. By degrees the fire burnt low, and died. To beg for more fuel was impossible, and Juliette shivered a little.

"You are cold, sweetheart," sighed Julien. "I will fetch a blanket from the bed and wrap you in it."

"No," she murmured, "wrap me in your arms —it will be better."

Darker and darker grew the garret, and faster and faster fell the snow.

"I have a fancy," said Juliette, breaking a long silence, "that it is the hour in which a fairy should appear to us. Let us look to see if she is coming!"

They peered from the window, but in the twilight no fairy was to be discerned; only an "old clo'" man was visible, trudging on his round.

"I declare," cried Julien, "he is the next best thing to your fairy! I will sell my summer suit and my velvet jacket. What do I want of a velvet jacket? Coffee and eggs will be much more cheerful."

"And I," vowed Juliette, "can spare my best hat easily—indeed, it is an encumbrance. If we make madame Cochard a small peace-offering she may allow us to remain until the morning."

"What a grand idea! We shall provide ourselves with a night's shelter and the means to entertain our friends as well. Hasten to collect our wardrobe, mignonette, while I crack my throat to make him hear. Hé, hé!"

At the repeated cries the "old clo'" man lifted his gaze to the fifth-floor window at last, and in a few minutes Julien and Juliette were kneeling on the boards above a pile of garments, which they raised one by one for his inspection.

" Regard, monsieur," said Julien, " this elegant summer suit! It is almost as good as new. I begin to hesitate to part with it. What shall we say for this elegant summer suit?"

The dealer fingered it disdainfully. " Show me boots," he suggested; " we can do business in boots."

" Alas!" replied Julien, " the only boots that I possess are on my feet. We will again admire the suit. What do you estimate it at—ten francs?"

" Are you insane? are you a lunatic?" returned the dealer. " To a reckless man it might be worth ten sous. Let us talk of boots!"

" I cannot go barefoot," expostulated Julien. " Juliette, my Heart, do you happen to possess a second pair of boots?"

Juliette shook her head forlornly. " But I have a hat with daisies in it," she said. " Observe, monsieur, the delicate tints of the buds! How like to nature, how exquisite they are! They make one dream of courtship in the woods. I will take five francs for it."

" From me I swear you will not take them!" said the " old clo'" man. " Boots," he pleaded; " for the love of God, boots!"

" Morbleu, what a passion for boots you have!" moaned the unhappy painter; " they obsess you, they warp your judgment. Can you think of nothing in the world but boots? Look, we come to the gem of the exhibition—a velvet jacket! A jacket like this confers an air of greatness, one could not feel the pinch of poverty in such a jacket. It is, I confess, a little white at the elbows, but such high lights are very effective. And observe the texture—as soft as a darling's cheek!"

The other turned it about with indifferent hands, and the Children began to realise that he would prove no substitute for a fairy after all. Then, while they watched him with sinking hearts, the door was suddenly opened, and the concierge tottered on the threshold.

"Monsieur, madame!" she panted, with such respect that they stared at each other.

"Eh bien?"

"A visitor!" She leant against the wall, overwhelmed.

"Who is it?"

"Madame la comtesse de Grand Ecusson!"

Actually! The Countess had kept her word after all, and now she rustled in, before the "old clo'" man could be banished. White as a virgin canvas, Julien staggered forward to receive her, a pair of trousers, which he was too agitated to remember, dangling under his arm. "Madame, this honour!" he stammered; and, making a piteous effort to disguise his beggary, "One's wardrobe accumulates so that, really, in a small ménage, one has no room to——"

"I have suffered from the inconvenience myself, monsieur," said the Countess graciously. "Your charming wife was so kind as to invite me to view your work; and see—my little Racine has come to wish his preservers a Happy New Year!"

And, on the honour of an historian, he brought one! Before they left she had given a commission for his portrait at a thousand francs, and purchased two landscapes, for which a thousand francs more would be paid on the morrow. When Sanquereau, and Lajeunie, and Tricotrin, and Pitou arrived, expecting the worst, they were amazed to discover the Children waltzing round the attic to the music of their own voices.

What *hurras* rang out when the explanation was forthcoming; what loans were promised to the guests, and what a gay quadrille was danced! It was not until the last figure had concluded that Julien and Juliette recognised that, although they would be wealthy in the morning, they were still penniless that night.

"Hélas! but we have no supper after all," groaned Julien.

"Pardon, it is here, monsieur!" shouted madame Cochard, who entered behind a kingly feast. "*Comment*, shall the artist honoured by madame la comtesse de Grand Ecusson have no supper? Pot-au-feu, monsieur; leg of mutton, monsieur; little tarts, monsieur; dessert, monsieur; and for each person a bottle of good wine!"

And the justice that was done to it, and the laughter that pealed under the slates! The Children didn't forget that it was all due to the dog. Juliette raised her glass radiantly.

"Gentlemen," she cried, "I ask you to drink to the Fairy Poodle!"

# LITTLE-FLOWER-OF-THE-WOOD

JANIAUD used to lie abed all day, and drink absinthe all night. When he contrived to write his poetry is a mystery. But he did write it, and he might have written other things, too, if he had had the will. It was often said that his paramount duty was to publish a history of modern Paris, for the man was an encyclopædia of unsuspected facts. Since he can never publish it now, however, I am free to tell the story of the Café du Bon Vieux Temps as he told it to an English editor and me one night on the terrace of the café itself. It befell thus:

When we entered that shabby little Montmartre restaurant, Janiaud chanced to be seated, at a table in a corner, sipping his favourite stimulant. He was deplorably dirty and suggested a scarecrow, and the English editor looked nervous when I offered an introduction. Still, Janiaud was Janiaud. The offer was accepted, and Janiaud discoursed in his native tongue.

At midnight the Editor ordered supper. Being unfamiliar with the Café du Bon Vieux Temps in those days, I said that I would drink beer. Janiaud smiled sardonically, and the waiter surprised us with the information that beer could not be supplied.

"What?"

"After midnight, nothing but champagne," he answered.

"Really? Well, let us go somewhere else," I proposed.

But the Editor would not hear of that. He had a princely soul, and, besides, he was "doing Paris."

"All the same, what does it mean?" he inquired of Janiaud.

Janiaud blew smoke rings. "It is the rule. During the evening the bock-drinker is welcomed here as elsewhere; but at midnight—well, you will see what you will see!"

And we saw very soon. The bourgeoisie of Montmartre had straggled out while we talked, and in a little while the restaurant was crowded with a rackety crew who had driven up in cabs. Everybody but ourselves was in evening-dress. Where the coppers had been counted carefully, gold was scattered. A space was cleared for dancing, and mademoiselle Nan Joliquette obliged the company with her latest comic song.

The Editor was interested. "It is a queer change, though! Has it always been like this?"

"Ask Janiaud," I said; "*I* don't know."

"Oh, not at all," replied Janiaud; "no, indeed, it was not always like this! It used to be as quiet at midnight as at any other hour. But it became celebrated as a supper-place; and now it is quite the thing for the ardent spirits, with money, to come and kick up their heels here until five in the morning."

"Curious, how such customs originate," remarked the Editor. "Here we have a restaurant which is out of the way, which is the reverse of luxurious, and which, for all that, seems to be a gold mine to the proprietor. Look at him! Look at his white waistcoat and his massive watch-chain, his air of prosperity."

"How did he come to rake it in like this, Janiaud—you know everything?" I said.

The poet stroked his beard, and glanced at his empty glass. The Editor raised a bottle.

"I cannot talk on Clicquot," demurred Janiaud. "If you insist, I will take another absinthe—they will allow it, in the circumstances. Sst, Adolphe!" The waiter whisked over to us. "Monsieur pays for champagne, but I prefer absinthe. There is no law against that, hein?"

Adolphe smiled tolerantly.

"Shall we sit outside?" suggested the Editor. "What do you think? It's getting rather riotous in here, isn't it?"

So we moved on to the terrace, and waited while Janiaud prepared his poison.

"It is a coincidence that you have asked me for the history of the Bon Vieux Temps to-night," he began, after a gulp; "if you had asked for it two days earlier, the climax would have been missing. The story completed itself yesterday, and I happened to be here and saw the end.

"Listen: Dupont—the proprietor whom monsieur has just admired—used to be chef to a family on the boulevard Haussmann. He had a very fair salary, and probably he would have remained in the situation till now but for the fact that he fell in love with the parlourmaid. She was a sprightly little flirt, with ambitions, and she accepted him only on condition that they should withdraw from domestic service and start a business of their own. Dupont was of a cautious temperament; he would have preferred that they should jog along with some family in the capacities of chef and housekeeper. Still, he consented; and, with what they had saved between them, they took over this little restaurant—where monsieur the Editor has treated me with such regal magnificence. It was not they who christened it—it was called the Café du Bon Vieux Temps already; how it obtained its name is also very interesting, but I have always avoided digressions in my work—that is one of the first principles of the literary art."

He swallowed some more absinthe.

"They took the establishment over, and they conducted it on the lines of their predecessor—they provided a déjeuner at one franc fifty, and a dinner at two francs. These are side-shows of the Bon Vieux Temps to-day, but, in the period of which I speak, they were all that it had to say for itself—they were its foundation-stone, and its cupola. When I had two francs to spare, I used to dine here myself.

"Well, the profits were not dazzling. And after marriage the little parlourmaid developed extravagant tastes. She had a passion for theatres. I, Janiaud, have nothing to say against theatres, excepting that the managers have never put on my dramas, but in the wife of a struggling restaurateur a craze for playgoing is not to be encouraged. Monsieur will agree? Also, madame had a fondness for dress. She did little behind the counter but display new ribbons and trinkets. She was very stupid at giving change—and always made the mistake on the wrong side for Dupont. At last he had to employ a cousin of his own as dame-de-comptoir. The expenses had increased, and the returns remained the same. In fine, Dupont was in difficulties; the Bon Vieux Temps was on its last legs.

"Listen: There was at that time a dancer called 'Little-Flower-of-the-Wood'; she was very chic, very popular. She had her appartement in the avenue Wagram, she drove to the stage-doors in her coupé, her photographs were sold like confetti at a carnival. Well, one afternoon, when Dupont's reflections were oscillating between the bankruptcy court and the Morgue, he was stupefied to receive a message from her—she bade him reserve a table for herself and some friends for supper that night!

"Dupont could scarcely credit his ears. He told his wife that a practical joker must be larking with him. He declared that he would take no notice of the message, that he was not such an ass as to be duped by it. Finally, he proposed to telegraph to Little-Flower-of-the-Wood, inquiring if it was genuine.

"Monsieur, as an editor, will have observed that a woman who is incapable in the daily affairs of life, may reveal astounding force in an emergency? It was so in this case. Madame put her foot down; she showed unsuspected commercial aptitude. She firmly forbade Dupont to do anything of the sort!

"'What?' she exclaimed. 'You will telegraph to her, inquiring? Never in this life! You might as well advise her frankly not to come. What would such a question mean? That you do not think the place is good enough for her! Well, if *you* do not think so, neither will *she*—she will decide that she had a foolish impulse and stay away!'

"'Mon Dieu! do you dream that a woman accustomed to the Café de Paris would choose to sup in an obscure little restaurant like ours?' said Dupont, fuming. 'Do you dream that I am going to buy partridges, and peaches, and wines, and heaven knows what other delicacies, in the dark? Do you dream that I am going to ruin myself while every instinct in me protests? It would be the act of a madman!'

"'My little cabbage,' returned madame, 'we are so near to ruin as we are, that a step nearer is of small importance. If Little-Flower-of-the-Wood should come, it might be the turning-point in our fortunes—people would hear of it, the Bon Vieux Temps might become renowned. Yes, we shall buy partridges, and peaches—and bonbons, and flowers also, and we shall hire a piano! And if our good angel should indeed send her to us, I swear she shall pass as pleasant an evening as if she had gone to Maxim's or the Abbaye!'

"Bien! She convinced him. For the rest of the day the place was in a state of frenzy. Never before had such a repast been seen in its kitchen, never before had he cooked with such loving care, even when he had been preparing a dinner of ceremony on the boulevard Haussmann. Madame herself ran out to arrange for the piano. The floor was swept. The waiter was put into a clean shirt. Dupont shed tears of excitement in his saucepans.

" He served the two-franc dinner that evening with eyes that watched nothing but the clock. All his consciousness now was absorbed by the question whether the dancer would come or not. The dinner passed somehow—it is to be assumed that the customers grumbled, but in his suspense Dupont regarded them with indifference. The hours crept by. It was a quarter to twelve—twelve o'clock. He trembled behind the counter as if with ague. Now it was time that she was here! His face was blanched, his teeth chattered in his head. What if he had been hoaxed after all? Half-past twelve! The sweat ran down him. Terror gripped his heart. A vision of all the partridges wasted convulsed his soul. Hark! a carriage stopped. He tottered forward. The door opened—she had come!

" Women are strange. Little-Flower-of-the-Wood, who yawned her pretty head off at Armenonville, was enraptured with the Bon Vieux Temps. The rest of the party took their tone from her, and everything was pronounced 'fun,' the coarse linen, the dirty ceiling, the admiring stares of the bock-drinkers. The lady herself declared that she had 'never enjoyed a supper so much in her life,' and the waiter—it was not Adolphe then—was dumfounded by a louis tip.

" Figure yourself the exultation of madame! 'Ah,' she chuckled, when they shut up shop at sunrise, 'what did I tell you, my little cabbage?' Monsieur, as an editor, will have observed that a woman who reveals astounding force in an emergency may triumph pettily when the emergency is over?

"'It remains to be seen whether they will come any more, however,' said Dupont. 'Let us go to bed. Mon Dieu, how sleepy I am!' It was the first occasion that the Bon Vieux Temps had been open after two o'clock in the morning.

"It was the first occasion, and for some days they feared it might be the last. But no, the dancer came again! A few eccentrics who came with her flattered themselves on having made a 'discovery.' They boasted of it. Gradually the name of the Bon Vieux Temps became known. By the time that Little-Flower-of-the-Wood had had enough, there was a supper clientèle without her. Folly is infectious, and in Paris there are always people catching a fresh craze. Dupont began to put up his prices, and levied a charge on the waiter for the privilege of waiting at supper. The rest of the history is more grave. . . . *Comment*, monsieur? Since you insist—again an absinthe!"

Janiaud paused, and ran his dirty fingers through his hair.

"This man can talk!" said the Editor, in an undertone.

"Gentlemen," resumed the poet, "two years passed. Little-Flower-of-the-Wood was on the Italian Riviera. The Italian Riviera was awake again after the heat of the summer—the little town that had dozed for many months began to stir. Almost every day now she saw new faces on the promenade; the sky was gentler, the sea was fairer. And she sat loathing it all, craving to escape from it to the bleak streets of Paris.

"Two winters before, she had been told, 'Your lungs will stand no more of the pranks you have been playing. You must go South, and keep early hours, or——' The shrug said the rest. And she had sold some of her diamonds and obeyed. Of course, it was an awful nuisance, but she must put up with it for a winter in order to get well. As soon as she was well, she would go back, and take another engagement. She had promised herself to be dancing again by May.

"But when May had come, she was no better. And travelling was expensive, and all places were alike to her since she was forbidden to return to Paris. She had disposed of more jewellery, and looked forward to the autumn. And in the autumn she had looked forward to the spring. So it had gone on.

"At first, while letters came to her sometimes, telling her how she was missed, the banishment had been alleviated; later, in her loneliness, it had grown frightful. Monsieur, her soul—that little soul that pleasure had held dumb—cried out, under misfortune, like a homeless child for its mother. Her longing took her by the throat, and the doctor had difficulty in dissuading her from going to meet death by the first train. She did not suspect that she was doomed in any case; he thought it kinder to deceive her. He had preached 'Patience, mademoiselle, a little patience!' And she had wrung her hands, but yielded—sustained by the hope of a future that she was never to know.

"By this time the last of her jewels was sold, and most of the money had been spent. The fact alarmed her when she dwelt upon it, but she did not dwell upon it very often—in the career of Little-Flower-of-the-Wood, so many financial crises had been righted at the last moment. No, although there was nobody now to whom she could turn for help, it was not anxiety that bowed her; the thoughts by which she was stricken, as she sauntered feebly on the eternal promenade, was that in Paris they no longer talked of her, and that her prettiness had passed away. She was forgotten, ugly! The tragedy of her exile was that.

"Now it was that she found out the truth—she learnt that there was no chance of her recovering. She made no reproaches for the lies that had been told her; she recognised that they had been well meant. All she said was, 'I am glad that it is not too late; I may see Paris still before the curtain tumbles—I shall go at once.'

"Not many months of life remained to her, but they were more numerous than her louis. It was an unfamiliar Paris that she returned to! She had quitted the Paris of the frivolous and fêted; she came back to the Paris of the outcast poor. The world that she had remembered gave her no welcome—she peered through its shut windows, friendless in the streets.

"Gentlemen, last night all the customers had gone from the little Café du Bon Vieux Temps but a woman in a shabby opera-cloak—a woman with tragic eyes, and half a lung. She sat fingering her glass of beer absently, though the clock over the desk pointed to a quarter to midnight, and at midnight beer-drinkers are no longer desired in the Bon Vieux Temps. But she was a stranger; it was concluded that she didn't know.

"Adolphe approached to enlighten her; 'Madame wishes to order supper?' he asked.

"The stranger shook her head.

"'Madame will have champagne?'

"'Don't bother me!' said the woman.

"Adolphe nodded towards the bock contemptuously. 'After midnight, only champagne is served here,' he said; 'it is the rule of the house.'

"'A fig for the rule!' scoffed the woman; 'I am going to stop.'

"Adolphe retired and sought the *patron*, and Dupont advanced to her with dignity.

"'Madame is plainly ignorant of our arrangements,' he began; 'at twelve o'clock one cannot remain here for the cost of a bock—the restaurant becomes very gay.'

"'So I believe,' she said; 'I want to see the gaiety.'

"'It also becomes expensive. I will explain. During the evening we serve a dinner at two francs for our clients in the neighbourhood—and until twelve o'clock one may order bocks, or what one wishes, at strictly moderate prices. But at twelve o'clock there is a change; we have quite a different class of trade. The world that amuses itself arrives here to sup and to dance. As a supper-house, the Bon Vieux Temps is known to all Paris.'

"'One lives and learns!' said the woman, ironically; 'but I know more about the Bon Vieux Temps than you seem to think. I can tell you the history of its success.'

"'Madame?' Dupont regarded her with haughty eyes.

"'Three years ago, monsieur, there was no "different class of trade" at twelve o'clock, and no champagne. The dinners at two francs for your clients in the neighbourhood were all that you aspired to. You did the cooking yourself in those days, and you did not sport a white waistcoat and a gold watch-chain.'

" 'These things have nothing to do with it. You will comply with the rule, or you must go. All is said!'

" 'One night Little-Flower-of-the-Wood had a whim to sup here,' continued the woman as if he had not spoken. 'She had passed the place in her carriage and fancied its name, or its flower-pot—or she wanted to do something new. Anyhow, she had the whim! I see you have the telephone behind the desk, monsieur—your little restaurant was not on the telephone when she wished to reserve a table that night; she had to reserve it by a messenger.'

" 'Well, well?' said Dupont, impatiently.

" 'But you were a shrewd man; you saw your luck and leapt at it—and when she entered with her party, you received her like a queen. You had even hired a piano, you said, in case Little-Flower-of-the-Wood might wish to play. I notice that a piano is in the corner now—no doubt you soon saved the money to buy one.'

" 'How do you know all this, you?' Dupont's gaze was curious.

" 'Her freak pleased her, and she came again and again—and others came, just to see her here. Then you recognised that your clients from the neighbourhood were out of place among the spendthrifts, who yielded more profit in a night than all the two-franc dinners in a month; you said, "At twelve o'clock there shall be no more bocks, only champagne!" I had made your restaurant famous—and you introduced the great rule that you now command me to obey.'

"'You? You are Little-Flower-of-the-Wood?'

"'Yes, it was I who did it for you,' she said quietly. 'And the restaurant flourished after Little-Flower-of-the-Wood had faded. Well, to-night I want to spend an hour here again, for the sake of what I used to be. Time brings changes, you understand, and I cannot conform with the great rule.' She opened the opera-cloak, trembling, and he saw that beneath it Little-Flower-of-the-Wood was in rags.

"'I am very poor and ill,' she went on. 'I have been away in the South for more than two years; they told me I ought to stop there, but I had to see Paris once more! What does it matter? I shall finish here a little sooner, that is all. I lodge close by, in a garret. The garret is very dirty, but I hear the music from the Bal Tabarin across the way. I like that—I persuade myself I am living the happy life I used to have. When I am tossing sleepless, I hear the noise and laughter of the crowd coming out, and blow kisses to them in the dark. You see, although one is forgotten, one cannot forget. I pray that their laughter will come up to me right at the end, before I die.'

"'You cannot afford to enter Tabarin's?' faltered Dupont; 'you are so stony as that?'

"'So stony as that!' she said. 'And I repeat that to-night I want to pass an hour in the midst of the life I loved. Monsieur, remember how you came to make your rule! Break it for me once! Let me stay here to-night for a bock!'

"Dupont is a restaurateur, but he is also a man. He took both her hands, and the waiters were astonished to perceive that the *patron* was crying.

"'My child,' he stammered, 'you will sup here as my guest.'

"Adolphe set before her, champagne that she sipped feverishly, and a supper that she was too ill to eat. And cabs came rattling from the Boulevard with boisterous men and women who no longer recalled her name—and with other 'Little-Flowers-of-theWood,' who had sprung up since her day.

"The woman who used to reign there sat among them looking back, until the last jest was bandied, and the last bottle was drained. Then she bade her host 'good-bye,' and crawled home—to the garret where she 'heard the music of the ball'; the garret where she 'prayed that the laughter would come up to her right at the end, before she died.'"

Janiaud finished the absinthe, and lurched to his feet. "That's all."

"Great Scott," said the Editor, "I wish he could write in English! But—but it's very pitiable, she may starve there; something ought to be done. . . . Can you tell us where she is living, monsieur?"

The poet shrugged his shoulders. "Is there no satisfying you? You asked me for the history of the Bon Vieux Temps, and there are things that even I do not know. However, I have done my best. I cannot say where the lady is living, but I can tell you where she was born." He pointed, with a drunken laugh, to his glass: "There!"

# A MIRACLE IN MONTMARTRE

Lajeunie, the luckless novelist, went to Pitou, the unrecognised composer, saying, " I have a superb scenario for a revue. Let us join forces! I promise you we shall make a fortune; we shall exchange our attics for first floors of fashion, and be wealthy enough to wear sable overcoats and Panama hats at the same time." In ordinary circumstances, of course, Pitou would have collaborated only with Tricotrin, but Tricotrin was just then engrossed by a tragedy in blank verse and seven acts, and he said to them, " Make a fortune together by all means, my comrades; I should be unreasonable if I raised objections to having rich friends."

Accordingly the pair worked like heroes of biography, and, after vicissitudes innumerable, *Patatras* was practically accepted at La Coupole. The manager even hinted that Fifi Blondette might be seen in the leading part. La Coupole, and Blondette! Pitou and Lajeunie could scarcely credit their ears. To be sure, she was no actress, and her voice was rather unpleasant, and she would probably want everything rewritten fifteen times before it satisfied her; but she was a beautiful woman and all Paris paid to look at her when she graced a stage; and she had just ruined Prince Czernowitz, which gave her name an additional value. "Upon my word," gasped Pitou, "our luck seems as incredible, my dear Lajeunie, as the plot of any of your novels! Come and have a drink!"

"I feel like Rodolphe at the end of *La Vie de Bohème*," he confided to Tricotrin in their garret one winter's night, as they went supperless to their beds. "Now that the days of privation are past, I recall them with something like regret. The shock of the laundress's totals, the meagre dinners at the Bel Avenir, these things have a fascination now that I part from them. I do not wish to sound ungrateful, but I cannot help wondering if my millions will impair the taste of life to me."

"To me they will make it taste much better," said Tricotrin, "for I shall have somebody to borrow money from, and I shall get enough blankets. *Brrr!* how cold I am! Besides, you need not lose touch with Montmartre because you are celebrated—you can invite us all to your magnificent abode. Also, you can dine at the Bel Avenir still, if sentiment pulls you that way."

"I shall certainly dine there," averred Pitou.

"And I shall buy a house for my parents, with a peacock and some deer on the lawn. At the same time, a triumph is not without its pathos. I see my return to the Bel Avenir, the old affections in my heart, the old greetings on my lips—and I see the fellows constrained and formal in my presence. I see madame apologising for the cuisine, instead of reminding me that my credit is exhausted, and the waiter polishing my glass, instead of indicating the cheapest item on the menu. Such changes hurt!" He was much moved. "A fortune is not everything," he sighed, forgetting that his pockets were as empty as his stomach. "Poverty yielded joys which I no longer know."

The poet embraced him with emotion. "I rejoice to find that Fame has not spoilt your nature," he cried; and he, too, forgot the empty pockets, and that the contract from La Coupole had yet to come. "Yes, we had hard times together, you and I, and *I* am still a nobody, but we shall be chums as long as we live. I feel that you can unbosom yourself to me, the poor bohemian, more freely than to any Immortal with whom you hobnob in scenes of splendour."

"Oh indeed, indeed!" assented Pitou, weeping. "You are as dear to me now as in the days of our struggles; I should curse my affluence if it made you doubt that! Good-night, my brother; God bless you."

He lay between the ragged sheets; and half an hour crept by.

"Gustave!"

"Well?" said Tricotrin, looking towards the other bed. "Not asleep yet?"

"I cannot sleep—hunger is gnawing at me."

"Ah, what a relentless realist is this hunger," complained the poet, "how it destroys one's illusions!"

"Is there nothing to eat in the cupboard?"

"Not a crumb—I am ravenous myself. But I recall a broken cigarette in my waistcoat pocket; let us cut it in halves!"

They strove, shivering, to appease their pangs by slow whiffs of a Caporal, and while they supped in this unsatisfactory fashion, there came an impetuous knocking at the street door.

"It must be that La Coupole has sent you a sack of gold to go on with!" Tricotrin opined. "Put your head out and see."

"It is Lajeunie," announced the composer, withdrawing from the window with chattering teeth. "What the devil can he want? I suppose I must go down and let him in."

"Perhaps we can get some more cigarettes from him," said Tricotrin; "it might have been worse."

But when the novelist appeared, the first thing he stammered was, "Give me a cigarette, one of you fellows, or I shall die!"

"Well, then, dictate your last wishes to us!" returned Pitou. "Do you come here under the impression that the house is a tobacconist's? What is the matter with you, what is up?"

"For three hours," snuffled Lajeunie, who looked half frozen and kept shuddering violently, "for three hours I have been pacing the streets, questioning whether I should break the news to you to-night or not. In one moment I told myself that it would be better to withhold it till the morning; in the next I felt that you had a right to hear it without delay. Hour after hour, in the snow, I turned the matter over in my mind, and——"

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Pitou, "is this an interminable serial at so much a column? Come to the point!"

Lajeunie beat his breast. "I am distracted," he faltered, "I am no longer master of myself. Listen! It occurred to me this evening that I might do worse than pay a visit to La Coupole and inquire if a date was fixed yet for the rehearsals to begin. Well, I went! For a long time I could obtain no interview, I could obtain no appointment—the messenger came back with evasive answers. I am naturally quick at smelling a rat—I have the detective's instinct—and I felt that there was something wrong. My heart began to fail me."

"For mercy's sake," groaned his unhappy

collaborator, " explode the bomb and bury my fragments ! Enough of these literary introductions. Did you see the manager, or didn't you ? "

" I did see the miscreant, the bandit-king, I saw him in the street. For I was not to be put off—I waited till he came out. Well, my friend, to compress the tragedy into one act, our hope is shattered—*Patatras* is again refused ! "

" Oh, heavens ! " moaned Pitou, and fell back upon the mattress as white as death.

" What explanation did he make ? " cried Tricotrin ; " what is the reason ? "

" The reason is that Blondette is an imbecile—she finds the part ' unworthy of her talents.' A part on which I have lavished all the wealth of my invention—she finds it beneath her, she said she would ' break her contract rather than play it.' Well, Blondette is the trump-card of his season—he would throw over the whole of the Academy sooner than lose Blondette. Since she objects to figuring in *Patatras*, *Patatras* is waste-paper to him. Alas ! who would be an author ? I would rather shovel coke, or cut corns for a living. He himself admitted that there was no fault to find with the revue, but, ' You know well, monsieur, that we must humour Blondette ! ' I asked him if he would try to bring her to her senses, but it seems that there have been a dozen discussions already—he is sick of the subject. Now it is settled—our manuscript will be banged back at us and we may rip ! "

" Oh, my mother ! " moaned Pitou. " Oh, the peacock and the deer ! "

" What's that you say ? " asked Lajeunie. " Are you positive that you haven't got a cigarette anywhere ? "

" I am positive that I have nothing," proclaimed Pitou vehemently, " nothing in life but a broken heart ! Oh, you did quite right to come to me, but now leave me—leave me to perish. I have no words, I am stricken. The next time you see me it will be in the Morgue. Mon Dieu, that beautiful wretch, that creature without conscience, or a note in her voice—by a shrug of her elegant shoulders she condemns me to the Seine ! "

" Ah, do not give way ! " exclaimed Tricotrin, leaping out of bed. " Courage, my poor fellow, courage ! Are there not other managers in Paris ? "

" There are—and *Patatras* has been refused by them. La Coupole was our last chance, and it has collapsed. We have no more to expect—it is all over. Is it not so, Lajeunie ? "

" All over," sobbed Lajeunie, bowing his head on the washhand-stand. " *Patatras* is dead ! "

Then for some seconds the only sound to be heard in the attic was the laboured breathing of the three young men's despair.

At last Tricotrin, drawing himself upright in his tattered nightshirt, said, with a gesture of dignity, "Well, the case may justify me—in the present situation it appears to me that I have the right to use my influence with Blondette!"

A signal from Mars could not have caused a more profound sensation. Pitou and Lajeunie regarded him with open mouths. "Your influence?" echoed Pitou; "your influence? I was not aware that you had ever met her."

"No," rejoined the poet darkly; "I have not met her. But there are circumstances in my life which entitle me to demand a service of this triumphant woman. Do not question me, my friends—what I shall say to her must remain a secret even from you. I declare, however, that nobody has a stronger claim on her than Gustave Tricotrin, the poor penny-a-liner whom she does not know!"

The sudden intervention—to say nothing of its literary flavour—so excited the collaborators that they nearly wrung his hands off: and Lajeunie, who recognised a promising beginning for another serial, was athirst for further hints.

"She has perhaps committed a murder, that fair fiend?" he inquired rapturously.

"Perhaps," replied Tricotrin.

"In that case she dare refuse you nothing."

"Why not, since I have never heard of it?"

"I was only jesting," said the novelist. "In sober earnest, I conjecture that you are married to her, like Athos to Miladi. As you stand there, with that grave air, you strongly resemble Athos."

"Nevertheless, Athos did not marry a woman to whom he had not spoken, and I repeat that I have never spoken to Blondette in my life."

"Well," said Lajeunie, "I have too much respect for your wishes to show any curiosity. Besides, by an expert the mystery is to be divined—before the story opens, you rendered her some silent aid, and your name will remind her of a great heroism?"

"I have never rendered her any aid at all," demurred Tricotrin, "and there is not the slightest reason to suppose that she has ever heard my name. But again, I have an incontestable right to demand a service of her, and for the sake of the affection I bear you both, I shall go and do it."

"When Tricotrin thinks that he is living in *The Three Musketeers* it is useless to try to pump him," said Pitou; "let us content ourselves with what we are told! Is it not enough? Our fate is in Blondette's hands, and he is in a position to ask a favour of her. What more can we want?"

But he could not resist putting a question on his own account after Lajeunie had skipped downstairs.

"Gustave, why did you never mention to me that you knew Blondette?"

"Morbleu! how often must I say that I do *not* know her?"

"Well—how shall I express it?—that some episode in your career gave you a claim on her consideration?"

"Because, by doing so, I should have both violated a confidence, and re-opened a wound which still burns," said Tricotrin, more like Athos than ever. "Only the urgency of your need, my comrade, could induce me to take the course that I project. Now let me sleep, for to-morrow I must have all my wits!"

It was, however, five o'clock already, and before either of them had slept long, the street was clattering with feet on their way to the laundries, and vendors of delicacies were bawling suggestions for appetising breakfasts.

"Not only do the shouts of these monsters disturb my slumber, but they taunt my starvation!" yawned the poet. "Yet, now I come to think of it, I have an appointment with a man who has sworn to lend me a franc, so perhaps I had better get up before he is likely to have spent it. I shall call upon Blondette in the afternoon, when she returns from her drive. What is your own programme?"

"My first attempt will be at a crèmerie in the rue St. Rustique, where I am inclined to think I may get credit for milk and a roll if I swagger."

"Capital," said Tricotrin; "things are looking up with us both! And if I raise the franc, there will be ten sous for you to squander on a recherché luncheon. Meet me in the place Dancourt in an hour's time. So long!"

Never had mademoiselle Blondette looked more captivating than when her carriage brought her back that day. She wore—but why particularise? Suffice it, that she had just been photographed. As she stepped to the pavement she was surprised by the obeisance of a shabby young man, who said in courtly tones, "Mademoiselle, may I beg the honour of an interview? I come from La Coupole." Having bestowed a glance of annoyance on him, she invited him to ascend the stairs, and a minute later Tricotrin was privileged to watch her take off her hat before the mirror.

"Well?" she inquired, "what's the trouble there now; what do they want?"

"So far as I know, mademoiselle," returned the intruder deferentially, "they want nothing but your beauty and your genius; but I myself want infinitely more—I want your attention and your pity. Let me explain without delay that I do not represent the Management, and that when I said I came from La Coupole I should have added that I did not come from the interior."

"Ça, par exemple!" she said sharply. "Who are you, then?"

"I am Tricotrin, mademoiselle—Gustave Tricotrin, at your feet. I have two comrades, the parents of *Patatras;* you have refused to play in it, and I fear they will destroy themselves. I come to beg you to save their lives."

"Monsieur," exclaimed the lady, and her eyes were brilliant with temper, "all that I have to say about *Patatras* I have said! The part gave me the hump."

"And yet," continued the suppliant firmly, "I hope to induce you to accept it. I am an author myself, and I assure you that it teems with opportunities that you may have overlooked in a casual reading."

"It is stupid!"

"As you would play it, I predict that it would make an epoch."

"And the music is no good."

"If I may venture to differ from you, the music is haunting—the composer is my lifelong friend."

"I appreciate the argument," she said, with fine irony. "But you will scarcely expect me to play a part that I don't like in order to please you!"

"Frankly, that is just what I do expect," replied the poet. "I think you will consent for my sake."

"Oh, really? For *your* sake? Would you mind mentioning why, before you go?"

"Because, mademoiselle," said Tricotrin, folding his arms, "in years gone by, you ruined me!"

"Mon Dieu!" she gasped, and she did not doubt that she was in the presence of a lunatic.

"Do not rush to the bell!" he begged. "If it will allay your panic, I will open the door and address you from the landing. I am not insane, and I solemnly assert that I am one of the men who have had the honour of being ruined by you."

"I have never seen you in my life before!"

"I know it. I even admit that I attach no blame to you in the matter. Nevertheless, you cost me two thousand five hundred and forty-three francs, and—as you may judge by my costume—I do not own the Crédit Lyonnais. If you will deign to hear my story, I guarantee that it will convince you. Do you permit me to proceed?"

The beauty nodded wonderingly, and the shabby young man continued in the following words:

"As I have said, I am an author; I shall 'live' by my poetry, but I exist by my prose—in fact, I turn my pen to whatever promises a dinner, be it a sonnet to the Spring, or a testimonial to a hair restorer. One summer, when dinners had been even more elusive than usual, I conceived the idea of calling attention to my talents by means of an advertisement. In reply, I received a note bidding me be on the third step of the Madeleine at four o'clock the following day, and my correspondent proved to be a gentleman whose elegant apparel proclaimed him a Parisian of the Boulevard.

"'You are monsieur Gustave Tricotrin?' he inquired.

"'I have that misfortune, monsieur,' said I. We adjourned to a café, and after a preliminary chat, from which he deduced that I was a person of discretion, he made me a proposal.

"He said, 'Monsieur Tricotrin, it is evident that you and I were designed to improve each other's condition; *your* dilemma is that, being unknown, you cannot dispose of your stories—*mine* is that, being known so well, I am asked for more stories than I can possibly write. I suggest that you shall write some for me. *I* will sign them, they will be paid for in accordance with my usual terms, and you shall receive a generous share of the swag. I need not impress upon you that I am speaking in the strictest confidence, and that you must never breathe a word about our partnership, even to the wife of your bosom.'

"'Monsieur,' I returned, 'I have no wife to breathe to, and my bosom is unsurpassed as a receptacle for secrets.'

"'Good,' he said. 'Well, without beating about the bush, I will tell you who I am.' He then uttered a name that made me jump, and before we parted it was arranged that I should supply him with a tale immediately as a specimen of my abilities.

"This tale, which I accomplished the same evening, pleased him so well that he forthwith gave me an order for two more. I can create a plot almost as rapidly as a debt, and before long I had delivered manuscripts to him in such wholesale quantities that if I had been paid cash for them, I should have been in a position to paint the Butte the richest shade of red. It was his custom, however, to make excuses and payments on account, and as we were capital friends by now, I never demurred.

"Well, things went on in this fashion until one day he hinted to me that I had provided him with enough manuscripts to last him for two years; his study was lumbered with evidence of my talent, and his market, after all, was not unlimited. He owed me then close upon three thousand francs, and it was agreed that he should wipe the debt out by weekly instalments. Enfin, I was content enough—I foresaw an ample income for two years to come, and renewed leisure to win immortality by my epics. I trust that my narrative does not fatigue you, mademoiselle?"

"What has it all to do with me, however?" asked the lady.

"You shall hear. Though the heroine comes on late, she brings the house down when she enters. For a few weeks my patron fulfilled his compact with tolerable punctuality, but I never failed to notice when we met that he was a prey to some terrible grief. At last, when he had reduced the sum to two thousand five hundred and forty-three francs—the figures will be found graven on my heart—he confided in me, he made me a strange request; he exclaimed:

"'Tricotrin, I am the most miserable of men!'

"'Poor fellow!' I responded. 'It is, of course, a woman?'

"'Precisely,' he answered. 'I adore her. Her beauty is incomparable, her fascinations are unparalleled, her intelligence is unique. She has only one blemish—she is mercenary.'

"'After all, perfection would be tedious,' I said.

"'You are a man of sensibility, you understand!' he cried. 'Her tastes have been a considerable strain on my resources, and in consequence my affairs have become involved. Now that I am in difficulties, she is giving me the chuck. I have implored and besought, I have worn myself out in appeals, but her firmness is as striking as her other gifts. There remains only one chance for me—a letter so impassioned that it shall awake her pity. *I*, as I tell you, am exhausted; I can no longer plead, no longer phrase, I am a wreck! Will you, as a friend, as a poet, compose such a letter and give it to me to copy?'

"Could I hesitate? I drove my pen for him till daybreak. All the yearnings of my own nature, all the romance of my fiery youth, I poured out in this appeal to a siren whom I had never seen, and whose name I did not know. I was distraught, pathetic, humorous, and sublime by turns. Subtle gleams of wit flashed artistically across the lurid landscape of despair. I reminded her of scenes of happiness—vaguely, because I had no details to elaborate; the reminiscences, however, were so touching that I came near to believing in them. Mindful of her solitary blemish, I referred to 'embarrassments now almost at an end'; and so profoundly did I affect myself, that while I wrote that I was weeping, it was really true. Well, when I saw the gentleman again he embraced me like a brother. 'Your letter was a masterpiece,' he told me; 'it has done the trick!'

"Mademoiselle, I do not wish to say who he was, and as you have known many celebrities, and had many love-letters, you may not guess.

But the woman was you! And if I had been a better business man, I should have written less movingly, for I recognised, even during my inspiration, that it was against my interests to reunite him to you. I was an artist; I thrilled your heart, I restored you to his arms—and you had the two thousand five hundred and forty-three francs that would otherwise have come to me! Never could I extract another sou from him!"

As Tricotrin concluded his painful history, mademoiselle Blondette seemed so much amused that he feared she had entirely missed its pathos. But his misgiving was relieved when she spoke.

"It seems to me I have been expensive to you, monsieur," she said; "and you have certainly had nothing for your money. Since this revue—which I own that I have merely glanced at—is the apple of your eye, I promise to read it with more attention."

A month later *Patatras* was produced at La Coupole after all, and no one applauded its performance more enthusiastically than the poet, who subsequently went to supper arm-in-arm with its creators.

"Mon vieux," said the elated pair, "we will not ask again by what means you accomplished this miracle, but let it teach you a lesson! To-night's experience proves that nothing is beyond your power if you resolve to succeed!"

"It proves," replied Tricotrin, "that Blondette's first impression was correct, for, between ourselves, my children, *Patatras* is no shakes."

Nevertheless, Lajeunie and Pitou wore laurels in Montmartre; and one is happy to say that their fees raised the young collaborators from privation to prosperity—thanks to Blondette's attractions—for nearly three weeks.

# THE DANGER OF BEING A TWIN

My Confessions must begin when I was four years old and recovering from swollen glands. As I grew well, my twin-brother, Grégoire, who was some minutes younger, was put to bed with the same complaint.

"What a misfortune," exclaimed our mother, "that Silvestre is no sooner convalescent than Grégoire falls ill!"

The doctor answered: "It astonishes me, madame Lapalme, that you were not prepared for it—since the children are twins, the thing was to be foreseen; when the elder throws the malady off, the younger naturally contracts it. Among twins it is nearly always so."

And it always proved to be so with Grégoire and me. No sooner did I throw off whooping-cough than Grégoire began to whoop, though I was at home at Vernon and he was staying with our grandmother at Tours. If I had to be taken to a dentist, Grégoire would soon afterwards be howling with toothache; as often as I indulged in the pleasures of the table Grégoire had a bilious attack. The influence I exercised upon him was so remarkable that once when my bicycle ran away with me and broke my arm, our mother consulted three medical men as to whether Grégoire's bicycle was bound to run away with him too. Indeed, my brother was distinctly apprehensive of it himself.

Of course, the medical men explained that he was susceptible to any abnormal physical or mental condition of mine, not to the vagaries of my bicycle. "As an example, madame, if the elder of two twins were killed in a railway accident, it would be no reason for thinking that an accident must befall a train by which the younger travelled. What sympathy can there be between locomotives? But if the elder were to die by his own hand, there is a strong probability that the younger would commit suicide also."

However, I have not died by my own hand, so Grégoire has had nothing to reproach me for on that score. As to other grounds—well, there is much to be said on both sides!

To speak truly, that beautiful devotion for which twins are so celebrated in drama and romance has never existed between my brother and myself. Nor was this my fault. I was of a highly sensitive disposition, and from my earliest years it was impressed upon me that Grégoire regarded me in the light of a grievance.

I could not help having illnesses, yet he would upbraid me for taking them. Then, too, he was always our mother's favourite, and instead of there being caresses and condolence for me when I was indisposed, there was nothing but grief for the indisposition that I was about to cause Grégoire. This wounded me.

Again at college. I shall not pretend that I was a bookworm, or that I shared Grégoire's ambitions; on the contrary, the world beyond the walls looked such a jolly place to me that the mere sight of a classroom would sometimes fill me with abhorrence. But, mon Dieu! if other fellows were wild occasionally, they accepted the penalties, and the affair was finished; on me rested a responsibility—my wildness was communicated to Grégoire. Scarcely had I resigned myself to dull routine again when Grégoire, the industrious, would find himself unable to study a page, and commit freaks for which he rebuked me most sternly. I swear that my chief remembrance of my college days is Grégoire addressing pompous homilies to me, in this fashion, when he was in disgrace with the authorities:

"I ask you to remember, Silvestre, that you have not only your own welfare to consider—you have mine! I am here to qualify myself for an earnest career. Be good enough not to put obstacles in my path. Your levity impels me to distractions which I condemn even while I yield to them. I perceive a weakness in your nature that fills me with misgivings for my future; if you do not learn to resist temptation, to what errors may I not be driven later on—to what outbreaks of frivolity will you not condemn me when we are men?"

Well, it is no part of my confession to whitewash myself—his misgivings were realised! So far as I had any serious aspirations at all, I aspired to be a painter, and, after combating my family's objections, I entered an art school in Paris. Grégoire, on the other hand, was destined for the law. During the next few years we met infrequently, but that my brother continued to be affected by any unusual conditions of my body and mind I knew by his letters, which seldom failed to contain expostulations and entreaties. If he could have had his way, indeed, I believe he would have shut me in a monastery.

Upon my word, I was not without consideration for him, but what would you have? I think some sympathy was due to me also. Regard the situation with my eyes! I was young, popular, an artist; my life was no more frivolous than the lives of others of my set; yet, in lieu of being free, like them, to call the tune and dance the measure, I was burdened with a heavier responsibility than weighs upon the shoulders of any paterfamilias. Let me but drink a bottle too much, and Grégoire, the grave, would subsequently manifest all the symptoms of intoxication. Let me but lose my head about a petticoat, and Grégoire, the righteous, would soon be running after a girl instead of attending to his work. I had a conscience—thoughts of the trouble that I was brewing for Grégoire would come between me and the petticoat and rob it of its charms; his abominable susceptibility to my caprices marred half my pleasures for me. Once when I sat distrait, bowed by such reflections, a woman exclaimed, "What's the matter with you? One would think you had a family!" "Well," I said, "I have a twin!" And I went away. She was a pretty woman, too!

Do you suppose that Maître Lapalme—he was Maître Lapalme by then, this egregious Grégoire—do you suppose that he wrote to bless me for my sacrifice? Not at all! Of my heroisms he knew nothing—he was conscious only of my lapses. To read his letters one would have imagined that I was a reprobate, a creature without honour or remorse. I quote from one of them—it is a specimen of them all. Can you blame me if I had no love for this correspondent?

MY BROTHER,

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF OUR BIRTH :—

Your attention is directed to my preceding communications on this subject. I desire to protest against the revelry from which you recovered either on the 15th or 16th inst. On the afternoon of the latter date, while engaged in a conference of the first magnitude, I was seized with an overwhelming desire to dance a quadrille at a public ball. I found it impossible to concentrate my attention on the case concerning which I was consulted; I could no longer express myself with lucidity. Outwardly sedate, reliable, I sat at my desk dizzied by such visions as pursued St. Anthony to his cell. No sooner was I free than I fled from Vernon, dined in Paris, bought a false beard, and plunged wildly into the vortex of a dancing-hall. Scoundrel! This is past pardon! My sensibilities revolt, and my prudence shudders. Who shall say but that one night I may be recognised? Who can foretell to what blackmail you may expose me? I, Maître Lapalme, forbid your profligacies, which devolve upon me; I forbid——" etc.

Such admissions my brother sent to me in a disguised hand, and unsigned; perhaps he feared that his blackmailer might prove to be myself! Typewriting was not yet general in France.

Our mother still lived at Vernon, where she contemplated her favourite son's success with the profoundest pride. Occasionally I spent a few days with her; sometimes even more, for she always pressed me to remain. I think she pressed me to remain, not from any pleasure in my society, but because she knew that while I was at home I could commit no actions that would corrupt Grégoire. One summer, when I visited her, I met mademoiselle Leuillet.

Mademoiselle Leuillet was the daughter of a widower, a neighbour. I remember that when our servant first announced her, I thought, "What a nuisance; how bored I am going to be!" And then she came in, and in an instant I was spellbound.

I am tempted to describe Berthe Leuillet to you as she entered our salon that afternoon in a white frock, with a basket of roses in her little hands, but I know very well that no description of a girl ever painted her to anybody yet. Suffice it that she was beautiful as an angel, that her voice was like the music of the spheres—more than all, that one felt all the time, "How good she is, how good, how good!"

I suppose the impression that she made upon me was plainly to be seen, for when she had gone, my mother remarked, "You did not say much. Are you always so silent in girls' company?" "No," I answered; "I do not often meet such girls."

But afterwards I often met Berthe Leuillet.

Never since I was a boy had I stayed at Vernon for so long as now; never had I repented so bitterly as now the error of my ways. I loved, and it seemed to me sometimes that my attachment was reciprocated, yet my position forbade me to go to monsieur Leuillet and ask boldly for his daughter's hand. While I had remained obscure, painters of my acquaintance, whose talent was no more remarkable than my own, had raised themselves from bohemia into prosperity. I abused myself, I acknowledged that I was an idler, a good-for-nothing, I declared that the punishment that had overtaken me was no more than I deserved. And then—well, then I owned to Berthe that I loved her!

Deliberately, of course, I should not have done this before seeking her father's permission, but it happened in the hour of our "good-bye," and I was suffering too deeply to subdue the impulse. I owned that I loved her—and when I left for Paris we were secretly engaged.

Mon Dieu! Now I worked indeed! To win this girl for my own, to show myself worthy of her innocent faith, supplied me with the most powerful incentive in life. In the quarter they regarded me first with ridicule, then with wonder, and, finally, with respect. For my enthusiasm did not fade. "He has turned over a new leaf," they said, "he means to be famous!" It was understood. No more excursions for Silvestre, no more junketings and recklessness! In the morning as soon as the sky was light I was at my easel; in the evening I studied, I sketched, I wrote to Berthe, and re-read her letters. I was another man—my ideal of happiness was now a wife and home.

For a year I lived this new life. I progressed. Men—men whose approval was a cachet—began to speak of me as one with a future. In the Salon a picture of mine made something of a stir. How I rejoiced, how grateful and sanguine I was! All Paris sang "Berthe" to me; the criticisms in the papers, the felicitations of my friends, the praise of the public, all meant Berthe—Berthe with her arms about me, Berthe on my breast.

I said that it was not too soon for me to speak now; I had proved my mettle, and, though I foresaw that her father would ask more before he gave his consent, I was, at least, justified in avowing myself. I telegraphed to my mother to expect me; I packed my portmanteau with trembling hands, and threw myself into a cab.

On the way to the station, I noticed the window of a florist; I bade the driver stop, and ran in to bear off some lilies for Berthe. The shop was so full of wonderful flowers that, once among them, I found some difficulty in making my choice. Hence I missed the train—and returned to my studio, incensed by the delay. A letter for me had just been delivered. It told me that on the previous morning Berthe had married my brother.

I could have welcomed a pistol-shot—my world rocked. Berthe lost, false, Grégoire's wife! I reiterated it, I said it over and over, I was stricken by it—and yet I could not realise that actually it had happened. It seemed too treacherous, too horrible to be true.

Oh, I made certain of it later, believe me!—I was no hero of a "great serial," to accept such intelligence without proof. I assured myself of her perfidy, and burnt her love-letters one by one; tore her photographs into shreds—strove also to tear her image from my heart.

Ah, that mocked me, that I could not tear! A year before I should have rushed to the cafés for forgetfulness, but now, as the shock subsided, I turned feverishly to work. I told myself that she had wrecked my peace, my faith in women, that I hated and despised her; but I swore that she should not have the triumph of wrecking my career, too. I said that my art still remained to me—that I would find oblivion in my art.

Brave words! But one does not recover from such blows so easily.

For months I persisted, denying myself the smallest respite, clinging to a resolution which proved vainer daily. Were art to be mastered by dogged endeavour, I should have conquered; but alas! though I could compel myself to paint, I could not compel myself to paint well. It was the perception of this fact that shattered me at last. I had fought temptation for half a year, worked with my teeth clenched, worked against nature, worked while my pulses beat and clamoured for the draughts of dissipation, which promised a speedier release. I had wooed art, not as art's lover, but as a tortured soul may turn to one woman in the desperate hope of subduing his passion for another—and art would yield nothing to a suitor who approached like that; I recognised that my work had been wasted, that the struggle had been useless—I broke down!

I need say little of the months that followed—it would be a record of degradations, and remorse; alternately, I fell, and was ashamed. There were days when I never left the house, when I was repulsive to myself; I shuddered at the horrors that I had committed. No saint has loved virtue better than I did during those long, sick days of self-disgust; no man was ever more sure of defying such hideous temptations if they recurred. As my lassitude passed, I would take up my brushes and feel confident for an hour, or for a week. And then temptation would creep on me once more—humming in my ears, and tingling in my veins. And temptation had lost its loathsomeness now—it looked again attractive. It was a siren, it dizzied my conscience, and stupefied my common-sense. Back to the mire!

One afternoon when I returned to my rooms, from which I had been absent since the previous day, I heard from the concierge that a visitor awaited me. I climbed the stairs without anticipation. My thoughts were sluggish, my limbs leaden, my eyes heavy and bloodshot. Twilight had gathered, and as I entered I discerned merely the figure of a woman. Then she advanced—and all Hell seemed to leap flaring to my heart. My visitor was Berthe.

I think nearly a minute must have passed while we looked speechlessly in each other's face—hers convulsed by entreaty, mine dark with hate.

"Have you no word for me?" she whispered.

"Permit me to offer my congratulations on your marriage, madame," I said; "I have had no earlier opportunity."

"Forgive me," she gasped. "I have come to beseech your forgiveness! Can you not forget the wrong I did you?"

"Do I look as if I had forgotten?"

"I was inconstant, cruel, I cannot excuse myself. But, O Silvestre, in the name of the love you once bore me, have pity on us! Reform, abjure your evil courses! Do not, I implore you, condemn my husband to this abyss of depravity, do not wreck my married life!"

Now I understood what had procured me the honour of a visit from this woman, and

I triumphed devilishly that I was the elder twin.

"Madame," I answered, "I think that I owe you no explanations, but I shall say this: the evil courses that you deplore were adopted, not vindictively, but in the effort to numb the agony that you had made me suffer. You but reap as you have sown."

"Reform!" she sobbed. She sank on her knees before me. "Silvestre, in mercy to us, reform!"

"I will never reform," I said inflexibly. "I will grow more abandoned day by day—my past faults shall shine as merits compared with the atrocities that are to come. False girl, monster of selfishness, you are dragging me to the gutter, and your only grief is that *he* must share my shame! You have blackened my soul, and you have no regret but that my iniquities must react on *him!* By the shock that stunned him in the first flush of your honeymoon, you know what I experienced when I received the news of your deceit; by the anguish of repentance that overtakes him after each of his orgies, which revolt you, you know that I was capable of being a nobler man. The degradation that you behold is your own work. You have made me bad, and you must bear the consequences—you cannot make me good now to save your husband!"

Humbled and despairing, she left me.

I repeat that it is no part of my confession to palliate my guilt. The sight of her had served merely to inflame my resentment—and it was at this stage that I began deliberately to contemplate revenge.

But not the one that I had threatened. Ah, no! I bethought myself of a vengeance more complete than that. What, after all, were these escapades of his that were followed by contrition, that saw him again and again a penitent at her feet? There should be no more of such trifles; she should be tortured with the torture that she had dealt to me—I would make him *adore another woman* with all his heart and brain!

It was difficult, for first I must adore, and tire of another woman myself—as my own passion faded, his would be born. I swore, however, that I would compass it, that I would worship some woman for a year—two years, as long as possible. He would be at peace in the meantime, but the longer my enslavement lasted, the longer Berthe would suffer when her punishment began.

For some weeks now I worked again, to provide myself with money. I bought new clothes and made myself presentable. When my appearance accorded better with my plan, I paraded Paris, seeking the woman to adore.

You may think Paris is full of adorable

women? Well, so contrary is human nature, that never had I felt such indifference towards the sex as during that tedious quest—never had a pair of brilliant eyes, or a well-turned neck appealed to me so little. After a month, my search seemed hopeless; I had viewed women by the thousand, but not one with whom I could persuade myself that I might fall violently in love.

How true it is that only the unforeseen comes to pass! There was a model, one Louise, whose fortune was her back, and who had long bored me by an evident tenderness. One day, this Louise, usually so constrained in my presence, appeared in high spirits, and mentioned that she was going to be married.

The change in her demeanour interested me; for the first time, I perceived that the attractions of Louise were not limited to her back. A little piqued, I invited her to dine with me. If she had said "yes," doubtless that would have been the end of my interest; but she refused. Before I parted from her, I made an appointment for her to sit to me the next morning.

"So you are going to be married, Louise?" I said carelessly, as I set the palette.

"In truth!" she answered.

"No regrets?"

"What regrets could I have? He is a very pretty boy, and well-to-do, believe me!"

"And *I* am not a pretty boy, nor well-to-do, hein?"

"Ah, zut!" she laughed, "you do not care for me."

"Is it so?" I said. "What would you say if I told you that I did care?"

"I should say that you told me too late, monsieur," she replied, with a shrug. "Are you ready for me to pose?" And this changed woman turned her peerless back on me without a scruple.

A little mortified, I attended strictly to business for the rest of the morning. But I found myself, on the following day, waiting for her with impatience.

"And when is the event to take place?" I inquired, more eagerly than I chose to acknowledge. This was by no means the sort of enchantress that I had been seeking, you understand.

"In the spring," she said. "Look at the ring he has given to me, monsieur; is it not beautiful?"

I remarked that Louise's hands were very well shaped; and, indeed, happiness had brought a certain charm to her face.

"Do you know, Louise, that I am sorry that you are going to marry?" I exclaimed.

"Oh, get out!" she laughed, pushing me away. "It is no good your talking nonsense to me now, don't flatter yourself!"

Pouchin, the sculptor, happened to come in at that moment. "Sapristi!" he shouted; "what changes are to be seen! The nose of our brave Silvestre is out of joint now that we are affianced, hein?"

She joined in his laughter against me, and I picked up my brush again in a vile humour.

Well, as I have said, she was not the kind of woman that I had contemplated, but these things arrange themselves—I became seriously enamoured of her. And, recognising that Fate works with her own instruments, I did not struggle. For months I was at Louise's heels; I was the sport of her whims, and her slights, sometimes even of her insults. I actually made her an offer of marriage, at which she snapped her white fingers with a grimace—and the more she flouted me, the more fascinated I grew. In that rapturous hour when her insolent eyes softened to sentiment, when her mocking mouth melted to a kiss, I was in Paradise. My ecstasy was so supreme that I forgot to triumph at my approaching vengeance.

So I married Louise; and yesterday was the twentieth anniversary of our wedding. Berthe? To speak the truth, my plot against her was frustrated by an accident. You see, before I could communicate my passion to Grégoire I had to recover from it, and—this invincible Louise!—I have not recovered from it yet. There are days when she turns her remarkable back on me now—generally when I am idle—but, mon Dieu! the moments when she turns her lips are worth working for. Therefore, Berthe has been all the time quite happy with the good Grégoire—and, since I possess Louise, upon my word of honour I do not mind!

## HERCULES AND APHRODITE

Mademoiselle Clairette used to say that if a danseuse could not throw a glance to the conductor of the band without the juggler being jealous, the Variety Profession was coming to a pretty pass. She also remarked that for a girl to entrust her life's happiness to a jealous man would be an act of lunacy. And then "Little Flouflou, the Juggling Genius," who was dying to marry her, would suffer tortures. He tried hard to conquer his failing, but it must be owned that Clairette's glances were very expressive, and that she distributed them indiscriminately. At Chartres, one night, he was so upset that he missed the umbrella, and the cigar, and the hat one after another, and instead of condoling with him when he came off the stage, all she said was "Butter-fingers!"

"Promise to be my wife," he would entreat: "it is not knowing where I am that gives me the pip. If you consented, I should be as right as rain—your word is better to me than any Management's contract. I trust you—it is only myself that I doubt; every time you look at a man I wonder, 'Am I up to that chap's mark? is my turn as clever as his? isn't it likely he will cut me out with her?' If you only belonged to me I should never be jealous again as long as I lived. Straight!"

And Clairette would answer firmly, "Poor boy, you couldn't help it—you are made like that. There'd be ructions every week; I should be for ever in hot water. I like you very much, Flouflou, but I'm not going to play the giddy goat. Chuck it!"

Nevertheless, he continued to worship her—from her tawdry tiara to her tinselled shoes—and everybody was sure that it would be a match one day. That is to say, everybody was sure of it until the Strong Man had joined the troupe.

Hercule was advertised as "The Great Paris Star." Holding himself very erect, he strutted, in his latticed foot-gear, with stiff little steps, and inflated lungs, to the footlights, and tore chains to pieces as easily as other persons tear bills. He lay down and supported a posse of mere mortals, and a van-load of "properties" on his chest, and regained his feet with a skip and a smirk. He——but his achievements are well known. Preceding these feats of force, was a feature of his entertainment which Hercule enjoyed inordinately. He stood on a pedestal and struck attitudes to show the splendour of his physique. Wearing only a girdle of tiger-skin, and bathed in limelight, he felt himself to be as glorious as a god. The applause was a nightly intoxication to him. He lived for it. All day he looked forward to the moment when he could mount the pedestal again and make his biceps jump, and exhibit the magnificence of his highly developed back to hundreds of wondering eyes. No woman was ever vainer of her form than was Hercule of his. No woman ever contemplated her charms more tenderly than Hercule regarded his muscles. The latter half of his "turn" was fatiguing, but to posture in the limelight, while the audience stared open-mouthed and admired his nakedness, that was fine, it was dominion, it was bliss.

Hercule had never experienced a great passion—the passion of vanity excepted—never waited in the rain at a street corner for a coquette who did not come, nor sighed, like the juggler, under the window of a girl who flouted his declarations. He had but permitted homage to be rendered to him. So when he fell in love with Clairette, he didn't know what to make of it.

For Clairette, sprightly as she was, did not encourage Hercule. He at once attracted and repelled her. When he rent chains, and poised prodigious weights above his head, she thrilled at his prowess, but the next time he attitudinised in the tiger-skin she turned up her nose. She recognised something feminine in the giant. Instinct told her that by disposition the Strong Man was less manly than Little Flouflou, whom he could have swung like an Indian club.

No, Hercule didn't know what to make of it. It was a new and painful thing to find himself the victim instead of the conqueror. For once in his career, he hung about the wings wistfully, seeking a sign of approval. For once he displayed his majestic figure on the pedestal blankly conscious of being viewed by a woman whom he failed to impress.

"What do you think of my turn?" he questioned at last.

"Oh, I have seen worse," was all she granted.

The giant winced.

"I am the strongest man in the world," he proclaimed.

"I have never met a Strong Man who wasn't!" said she.

"But there is someone stronger than I am," he owned humbly. (Hercule humble!) "Do you know what you have done to me, Clairette? You have made a fool of me, my dear."

"Don't be so cheeky," she returned. "Who gave you leave to call me 'Clairette,' and 'my dear'? A little more politeness, if you please, monsieur!" And she cut the conversation short as unceremoniously as if he had been a super.

Those who have seen Hercule only in his "act"—who think of him superb, supreme—may find it difficult to credit the statement, but, honestly, the Great Star used to trot at her heels like a poodle. And she was not a beauty by any means, with her impudent nose, and her mouth that was too big to defy criticism. Perhaps it was her carriage that fascinated him, the grace of her slender figure, which he could have snapped as a child snaps jumbles. Perhaps it was those eyes which unwittingly promised more than she gave. Perhaps, above all, it was her indifference. Yes, on consideration, it must have been her indifferent air, the novelty of being scorned, that made him a slave.

But, of course, she was more flattered by his bondage than she showed. Every night he planted himself in the prompt-entrance to watch her dance and clap his powerful hands in adulation. She could not be insensible to the compliment, though her smiles were oftenest for Flouflou, who planted himself, adulating, on the opposite side. *Adagio! Allegretto! Vivace!* Unperceived by the audience, the gaze of the two men would meet across the stage with misgiving. Each feared the other's attentions to her, each wished with all his heart that the other would get the sack; they glared at each other horribly.

And, meanwhile, the orchestra played its sweetest, and Clairette pirouetted her best, and the Public, approving the obvious, saw nothing of the intensity of the situation.

Imagine the emotions of the little juggler, jealous by temperament, jealous even without cause, now that he beheld a giant laying siege to her affections!

And then, on a certain evening, Clairette threw but two smiles to Flouflou, and three to Hercule.

The truth is that she did not attach so much significance to the smiles as did the opponents who counted them. But that accident was momentous. The Strong Man made her a burning offer of marriage within half an hour; and next, the juggler made her furious reproaches.

Now she had rejected the Strong Man—and, coming when they did, the juggler's reproaches had a totally different effect from the one that he had intended. So far from exciting her sympathy towards him, they accentuated her compassion for Hercule. How stricken he had been by her refusal! She could not help remembering his despair as he sat huddled on a hamper, a giant that she had crushed. Flouflou was a thankless little pig, she reflected, for, as a matter of fact, he had had a good deal to do with her decision. She had deserved a better reward than to be abused by him!

Yes, her sentiments towards Hercule were newly tender, and an event of the next night intensified them. It was Hercule's custom, in every town that the Constellation visited, to issue a challenge. He pledged himself to present a " Purse of Gold "—it contained a ten-franc piece —to any eight men who vanquished him in a tug-of-war. The spectacle was always an immense success—the eight yokels straining, and tumbling over one another, while Hercule, wearing a masterful smile, kept his ten francs intact. A tug-of-war had been arranged for the night following, and by every law of prudence, Hercule should have abstained from the bottle during the day.

But he did not. His misery sent discretion headlong to the winds. Every time that he groaned for the danseuse he took another drink, and when the time came for him to go to the show, the giant was as drunk as a lord. The force of habit enabled him to fulfil some of his stereotyped performance, he emerged from that without disgrace; but when the eight brawny competitors lumbered on to the boards, his heart sank. The other artists winked at one another appreciatively, and the manager hopped with apprehension.

Sure enough, the hero's legs made strange trips to-night. The sixteen arms pulled him, not only over the chalk line, but all over the stage. They played havoc with him. And then the manager had to go on and make a speech, besides, because the "Purse of Gold" aroused dissatisfaction. The fiasco was hideous.

"Ah, Clairette," moaned the Strong Man, pitifully, "it was all through you!"

Elsewhere a Strong Man had put forth that plea, and the other lady had been inexorable. But Clairette faltered.

"Through me?" she murmured, with emotion.

"I'm no boozer," muttered Hercule, whom the disaster had sobered. "If I took too much to-day, it was because I had got such a hump."

"But why be mashed on me, Hercule?" she said; "why not think of me as a pal?"

"You're talking silly," grunted Hercule.

"Perhaps so," she confessed. "But I'm awfully sorry the turn went so rotten."

"Don't kid!"

"Why should I kid about it?"

"If you really meant it, you would take back what you said yesterday."

"Oh!" The gesture was dismayed.

"You see! What's the good of gassing? As soon as I ask anything of you, you dry up. Bah! I daresay you will guy me just as much as all the rest. I know you!"

"If you weren't in trouble, I'd give you a thick ear for that," she said. "You ungrateful brute!" She turned haughtily away.

"Clairette!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Don't get the needle! I'm off my rocker to-night."

"Ah! That's all right, cully!" Her hand was swift. "I've been there myself."

"Clairette!" He caught her close.

"Here, what are you at?" she cried. "Drop it!"

"Clairette! Say 'yes.' I'm loony about you. There's a duck! I'll be a daisy of a husband. Won't you?"

"Oh, I—I don't know," she stammered.

And thus were they betrothed.

To express what Flouflou felt would be but to harrow the reader's sensibilities. What he said, rendered into English, was:

"I'd rather you had given me the go-by for any cove in the crowd than that swine!"

They were in the ladies' dressing-room. "The Two Bonbons" had not finished their duet, and he was alone with her for a moment. She was pinning a switch into her back hair, in front of the scrap of looking-glass against the mildewed wall.

"You don't do yourself any good with me, Flouflou, by calling Hercule names," she replied icily.

"So he is!"

"Oh, you are jealous of him," she retorted.

"Of course I am jealous of him," owned Flouflou; "you can't rile me by saying that.

Didn't I love you first? And a lump better than *he* does."

"Now you're talking through your hat!"

"You usedn't to take any truck of him, yourself, at the beginning. He only got round you because he was drunk and queered his business. I have been drunk, too—you didn't say you'd marry *me*. It's not in him to love any girl for long—he's too sweet on himself."

"Look here," she exclaimed. "I've had enough. Hook it! And don't you speak to me any more. Understand?" She put the hairpins aside, and began to whitewash her hands and arms.

"That's the straight tip," said Flouflou, brokenly; "I'm off. Well, I wish you luck, old dear!"

"Running him down to me like that! A dirty trick, I call it."

"I never meant to, straight; I—— Sorry, Clairette." He lingered at the door. "I suppose I shall have to say 'madame' soon?"

"Footle," she murmured, moved.

"You've not got your knife into me, have you, Clairette? I didn't mean to be a beast. I'd have gone to hell for you, that's all, and I wish I was dead."

"Silly kid!" she faltered, blinking. And then "The Two Bonbons" came back to doff their costumes, and he was turned out.

Never had Hercule been so puffed up. His knowledge of the juggler's sufferings made the victory more rapturous still. No longer did Flouflou stand opposite-prompt to watch Clairette's dance; no longer did he loiter about the passages after the curtain was down, on the chance of being permitted to escort her to her doorstep. Such privileges were the Strong Man's alone. She was affianced to him! At the swelling thought, his chest became Brobdingnagian. His bounce in company was now colossal; and it afforded the troupe a popular entertainment to see him drop to servility in her presence. Her frown was sufficient to reduce him to a cringe. They called him the "Quick-change artist."

But Hercule scarcely minded cringing to her; at all events he scarcely minded it in a tête-à-tête; she was unique. He would have run to her whistle, and fawned at her kick. She had agreed to marry him in a few weeks' time, and his head swam at the prospect. Visions of the future dazzled him. When he saw her to her home after the performance, he used to talk of the joint engagements they would get by-and-by—"not in snide shows like this, but in first-class halls"—and of how tremendously happy they were going to be. And then Clairette would stifle a sigh and say, "Oh, yes, of course!" and try to persuade herself that she had no regrets.

Meanwhile the Constellation had not been playing to such good business as the manager had anticipated. He had done a bold thing in obtaining Hercule—who, if not so famous as the posters pretended, was at least a couple of rungs above the other humble mountebanks—and the box-office ought to have yielded better results. Monsieur Blond was anxious. He asked himself what the Public wanted. Simultaneously he pondered the idea of a further attraction, and perspired at the thought of further expense.

At this time the "Living Statuary" turn was the latest craze in the variety halls of fashion, and one day poor Blond, casting an expert eye on his danseuse, questioned why she should not be billed, a town or two ahead, as "Aphrodite, the Animated Statue, Direct from Paris."

To question was to act. The weather was mild, and, though Clairette experienced pangs of modesty when she learnt that the Statue's "costume" was to be applied with a sponge, she could not assert that she would be in danger of taking a chill. Besides, her salary was to be raised a trifle.

Blond rehearsed her assiduously (madame Blond in attendance), and, to his joy, she displayed a remarkable gift for adopting the poses. As "The Bather" she promised to be entrancing, and, until she wobbled, her "Nymph at the Fountain" was a pure delight. Moreover, thanks to her accomplishments as a dancer, she did not wobble very badly.

All the same, when the date of her début arrived, she was extremely nervous. Elated by his inspiration, Blond had for once been prodigal with the printing, and on her way to the stage door, it seemed to her that the name of "Aphrodite" flamed from every hoarding in the place. Hercule met her with encouraging words, but the ordeal was not one that she wished to discuss with him, and he took leave of her very much afraid that she would break down.

What was his astonishment to hear her greeted with salvos of applause! Blond's enterprise had undoubtedly done the trick. The little hall rocked with enthusiasm, and, cloaked in a voluminous garment, "Aphrodite" had to bow her acknowledgments again and again. When the time came for Hercule's own postures, they fell, by comparison, quite flat.

"Ciel!" she babbled, on the homeward walk; "who would have supposed that I should go so strong? If I knock them like this next week too, I shall make Blond spring a bit more!" She looked towards her lover for congratulations; so far he had been rather unsatisfactory.

"Oh, well," he mumbled, "it was a very good audience, you know, I never saw a more generous house—you can't expect to catch on like it anywhere else."

His tone puzzled her. Though she was quite alive to the weaknesses of her profession, she could not believe that her triumph could give umbrage to her fiancé. Hercule, her adorer, to be annoyed because she had received more "hands" than *he* had? Oh, it was mean of her to fancy such a thing!

But she was conscious that he had never wished her "pleasant dreams" so briefly as he did that night, and the Strong Man, on his side, was conscious of a strange depression. He could not shake it off. The next evening, too, he felt it. Wherever he went, he heard praises of her proportions. The dancing girl had, in fact, proved to be beautifully formed, and it could not be disputed that "Aphrodite" had wiped "Hercules" out. Her success was repeated in every town. Morosely now did he make his biceps jump, and exhibit the splendours of his back—his poses commanded no more than half the admiration evoked by hers. His muscles had been eclipsed by her graces. Her body had outvied his own!

Oh, she was dear to him, but he was an "artiste"! There are trials that an artiste cannot bear. He hesitated to refer to the subject, but when he nursed her on his lap, he thought what a great fool the Public was to prefer this ordinary woman to a marvellous man. He derived less rapture from nursing her. He eyed her critically. His devotion was cankered by resentment.

And each evening the resentment deepened. And each evening it forced him to the wings against his will. He stood watching, though every burst of approval wrung his heart. Soured, and sexless, he watched her. An intense jealousy of the slim nude figure posturing in the limelight took possession of him. It had robbed him of his plaudits! He grew to hate it, to loathe the white loveliness that had dethroned him. It was no longer the figure of a mistress that he viewed, but the figure of a rival. If he had dared, he would have hissed her.

Finally, he found it impossible to address her with civility. And Clairette married Flouflou, after all.

" Clairette," said Flouflou on the day they were engaged, " if you don't chuck the Statuary turn, I know that one night I shall massacre the audience! Won't you give it up for me, peach? "

" So you are beginning your ructions already? " laughed Clairette. " I told you what a handful you would be. Oh, well then, just as you like, old dear!—in this business a girl may meet with a worse kind of jealousy than yours."

# "PARDON, YOU ARE MADEMOISELLE GIRARD!"

A NEWSVENDOR passed along the terrace of the Café d'Harcourt bawling *La Voix Parisienne.* The Frenchman at my table made a gesture of aversion. Our eyes met; I said:

"You do not like *La Voix?*"

He answered with intensity:

"I loathe it."

"What's its offence?"

The wastrel frowned; he fiddled with his frayed and filthy collar.

"You revive painful associations; you ask me for a humiliating story," he murmured—and regarded his empty glass.

I can take a hint as well as most people.

He prepared his poison reflectively.

"I will tell you all," he said.

One autumn the Editor of *La Voix* announced to the assistant-editor: "I have a great idea for booming the paper."

The assistant-editor gazed at him respectfully.

"I propose to prove, in the public interest, the difficulty of tracing a missing person. I shall instruct a member of the staff to disappear. I shall publish his description, and his portrait; and I shall offer a prize to the first stranger who identifies him."

The assistant-editor had tact and he did not reply that the idea had already been worked in London with a disappearing lady. He replied:

"What an original scheme!"

"It might be even more effective that the disappearing person should be a lady," added the chief, like one inspired.

"That," cried the assistant-editor, "is the top brick of genius!"

So the Editor reviewed the brief list of his lady contributors, and sent for mademoiselle Girard.

His choice fell upon mademoiselle Girard for two reasons. First, she was not facially remarkable—a smudgy portrait of her would look much like a smudgy portrait of anybody else. Second, she was not widely known in Paris, being at the beginning of her career; in fact, she was so inexperienced that hitherto she had been entrusted only with criticism.

However, the young woman had all her buttons on; and after he had talked to her, she said cheerfully:

"Without a chaperon I should be conspicuous, and without a fat purse I should be handicapped. So it is understood that I am to provide myself with a suitable companion, and to draw upon the office for expenses?"

"Mademoiselle," returned the Editor, "the purpose of the paper is to portray a drama of life, not to emulate an opéra bouffe. I shall explain more fully. Please figure to yourself that you are a young girl in an unhappy home. Let us suppose that a stepmother is at fault. You feel that you can submit to her oppression no longer—you resolve to be free, or to end your troubles in the Seine. Weeping, you pack your modest handbag; you cast a last, lingering look at the oil painting of your own dear mother who is with the Angels in the drawing-room; that is to say, of your own dear mother in the drawing-room, who is with the Angels. It still hangs there—your father has insisted on it. Unheard, you steal from the house; the mysterious city of Paris stretches before your friendless feet. Can you engage a chaperon? Can you draw upon an office for expenses? The idea is laughable. You have saved, at a liberal computation, forty francs; it is necessary for you to find employment without delay. But what happens? Your father is distracted by your loss, the thought of the perils that beset you frenzies him; he invokes the aid of the police. Well, the object of our experiment is to demonstrate that, in spite of an advertised reward, in spite of a published portrait, in spite of the Public's zeal itself, you will be passed on the boulevards and in the slums by myriads of unsuspecting eyes for weeks."

The girl inquired, much less blithely:

"How long is this experiment to continue?"

"It will continue until you are identified, of course. The longer the period, the more triumphant our demonstration."

"And I am to have no more than forty francs to exist on all the time? Monsieur, the job does not call to me."

"You are young and you fail to grasp the value of your opportunity," said the Editor, with paternal tolerance. "From such an assignment you will derive experiences that will be of the highest benefit to your future. Rejoice, my child! Very soon I shall give you final instructions."

The Frenchman lifted his glass, which was again empty.

"I trust my voice does not begin to grate upon you?" he asked solicitously. "Much talking affects my uvula."

I made a trite inquiry.

He answered that, since I was so pressing, he would!

"Listen," he resumed, after a sip.

I am not in a position to say whether the young lady humoured the Editor by rejoicing, but she obeyed him by going forth. Her portrait was duly published, *La Voix* professed ignorance of her whereabouts from the moment that she left the rue Louis-le-Grand, and a prize of two thousand francs was to reward the first stranger who said to her, "Pardon, you are mademoiselle Girard!" In every issue the Public were urged towards more strenuous efforts to discover her, and all Paris bought the paper, with amusement, to learn if she was found yet.

At the beginning of the week, misgivings were ingeniously hinted as to her fate. On the tenth day the Editor printed a letter (which he had written himself), hotly condemning him for exposing a poor girl to danger. It was signed "An Indignant Parent," and teemed with the most stimulating suggestions. Copies of *La Voix* were as prevalent as gingerbread pigs at a fair. When a fortnight had passed, the prize was increased to three thousand francs, and many young men resigned less promising occupations, such as authorship and the fine arts, in order to devote themselves exclusively to the search.

Personally, I had something else to do. I am an author, as you may have divined by the rhythm of my impromptu phrases, but it happened at that time that a play of mine had been accepted at the Grand Guignol, subject to an additional thrill being introduced, and I preferred pondering for a thrill in my garret to hunting for a pin in a haystack.

Enfin, I completed the drama to the Management's satisfaction, and received a comely little cheque in payment. It was the first cheque that I had seen for years! I danced with joy, I paid for a shampoo, I committed no end of follies.

How good is life when one is rich—immediately one joins the optimists! I feared the future no longer; I was hungry, and I let my appetite do as it liked with me. I lodged in Montmartre, and it was my custom to eat at the unpretentious Bel Avenir, when I ate at all; but that morning my mood demanded something resplendent. Rumours had reached me of a certain Café Eclatant, where for one-franc-fifty one might breakfast on five epicurean courses amid palms and plush. I said I would go the pace. I adventured the Café Eclatant.

The interior realised my most sanguine expectations. The room would have done no discredit to the Grand Boulevard. I was so much exhilarated, that I ordered a half bottle of barsac, though I noted that here it cost ten sous more than at the Bel Avenir, and I prepared to enjoy the unwonted extravagance of my repast to the concluding crumb.

Monsieur, there are events in life of which it is difficult to speak without bitterness. When I recall the disappointment of that déjeuner at the Café Eclatant, my heart swells with rage.

The soup was slush, the fish tasted like washing, the meat was rags. Dessert consisted of wizened grapes; the one thing fit to eat was the cheese.

As I meditated on the sum I had squandered, I could have cried with mortification, and, to make matters more pathetic still, I was as hungry as ever. I sat seeking some caustic epigram to wither the dame-de-comptoir; and presently the door opened and another victim entered. Her face was pale and interesting. I saw, by her hesitation, that the place was strange to her. An accomplice of the chief brigand pounced on her immediately, and bore her to a table opposite. The misguided girl was about to waste one-franc-fifty. I felt that I owed a duty to her in this crisis. The moment called for instant action; before she could decide between slush and hors d'œuvres, I pulled an envelope from my pocket, scribbled a warning, and expressed it to her by the robber who had brought my bill.

I had written, "The déjeuner is dreadful. Escape!"

It reached her in the nick of time. She read the wrong side of the envelope first, and was evidently puzzled. Then she turned it over. A look of surprise, a look of thankfulness, rendered her still more fascinating. I perceived that she was inventing an excuse—that she pretended to have forgotten something. She rose hastily and went out. My barsac was finished—shocking bad tipple it was for the money!—and now I, too, got up and left. When I issued into the street, I found her waiting for me.

"I think you are the knight to whom my gratitude is due, monsieur?" she murmured graciously.

"Mademoiselle, you magnify the importance of my service," said I.

"It was a gallant deed," she insisted. "You have saved me from a great misfortune—perhaps greater than you understand. My finances are at their lowest ebb, and to have beggared myself for an impossible meal would have been no joke. Thanks to you, I may still breakfast satisfactorily somewhere else. Is it treating you like Baedeker's Guide to the Continent if I ask you to recommend a restaurant?"

"Upon my word, I doubt if you can do better than the Bel Avenir," I said. "A moment ago I was lacerated with regret that I had not gone there. But there is a silver lining to every hash-house, and my choice of the Eclatant has procured me the glory of your greeting."

She averted her gaze with a faint smile. She had certainly charm. Admiration and hunger prompted me to further recklessness. I said: "This five-course swindle has left me ravenous, and I am bound for the Avenir myself. May I beg for the rapture of your company there?"

"Monsieur, you overwhelm me with chivalries," she replied; "I shall be enchanted." And, five minutes later, the Incognita and I were polishing off smoked herring and potato salad, like people who had no time to lose.

"Do you generally come here?" she asked, when we had leisure.

"Infrequently—no oftener than I have a franc in my pocket. But details of my fasts would form a poor recital, and I make a capital listener."

"You also make a capital luncheon," she remarked.

"Do not prevaricate," I said severely. "I am consumed with impatience to hear the history of your life. Be merciful and communicative."

"Well, I am young, fair, accomplished, and of an amiable disposition," she began, leaning her elbows on the table.

"These things are obvious. Come to confidences! What is your profession?"

"By profession I am a clairvoyante and palmist," she announced.

I gave her my hand at once, and I was in two minds about giving her my heart. "Proceed," I told her; "reveal my destiny!"

Her air was profoundly mystical.

"In the days of your youth," she proclaimed, "your line of authorship is crossed by many rejections."

"Oh, I am an author, hein? That's a fine thing in guesses!"

"It is written!" she affirmed, still scrutinising my palm. "Your dramatic lines are—er—countless; some of them are good. I see danger; you should beware of—I cannot distinguish!" she clasped her brow and shivered. "Ah, I have it! You should beware of hackneyed situations."

"So the Drama is 'written,' too, is it?"

"It is written, and I discern that it is already accepted," she said. "For at the juncture where the Eclatant is eclipsed by the Café du Bel Avenir, there is a distinct manifestation of cash."

"Marvellous!" I exclaimed. "And will the sybil explain why she surmised that I was a dramatic author?"

"Even so!" she boasted. "You wrote your message to me on an envelope from the Dramatic Authors' Society. What do you think of my palmistry?"

"I cannot say that I think it is your career. You are more likely an author yourself, or an actress, or a journalist. Perhaps you are mademoiselle Girard. Mon Dieu! What a piece of luck for me if I found mademoiselle Girard!"

"And what a piece of luck for her!"

"Why for her?"

"Well, she cannot be having a rollicking time.

It would not break her heart to be found, one may be certain."

"In that case," I said, "she has only to give some one the tip."

"Oh, that would be dishonourable—she has a duty to fulfil to *La Voix*, she must wait till she is identified. And, remember, there must be no half measures—the young man must have the intuition to say firmly, 'Pardon, you are mademoiselle Girard!'"

Her earnest gaze met mine for an instant.

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I do not see how anyone can be expected to identify her in the street. The portrait shows her without a hat, and a hat makes a tremendous difference."

She sighed.

"What is your trouble?" I asked.

"Man!"

"Man? Tell me his address, that I may slay him."

"The whole sex. Its impenetrable stupidity. If mademoiselle Girard is ever recognised it will be by a woman. Man has no instinct."

"May one inquire the cause of these flattering reflections?"

Her laughter pealed.

"Let us talk of something else!" she commanded. "When does your play come out, monsieur Thibaud Hippolyte Duboc? You see I learnt your name, too."

"You have all the advantages," I complained. "Will you take a second cup of coffee, mademoiselle—er——?"

"No, thank you, monsieur," she said.

"Well, will you take a liqueur, mademoiselle—er——?"

"Mademoiselle Er will not take a liqueur either," she pouted.

"Well, will you take a walk?"

In the end we took an omnibus, and then we proceeded to the Buttes-Chaumont—and very agreeable I found it there. We chose a seat in the shade, and I began to feel that I had known her all my life. More precisely, perhaps, I began to feel that I wished to know her all my life. A little breeze was whispering through the boughs, and she lifted her face to it gratefully.

"How delicious," she said. "I should like to take off my hat."

"Do, then!"

"Shall I?"

"Why not?"

She pulled the pins out slowly, and laid the hat aside, and raised her eyes to me, smiling.

"Well?" she murmured.

"You are beautiful."

"Is that all?"

"What more would you have me say?"

The glare of sunshine mellowed while we talked; clocks struck unheeded by me. It amazed me at last, to discover how long she had held me captive. Still, I knew nothing of her affairs, excepting that she was hard up—that, by comparison, I was temporarily prosperous. I did not even know where she meant to go when we moved, nor did it appear necessary to inquire yet, for the sentiment in her tones assured me that she would dismiss me with no heartless haste.

Two men came strolling past the bench, and one of them stared at her so impudently that I burned with indignation. After looking duels at him, I turned to her, to deprecate his rudeness. Judge of my dismay when I perceived that she was shuddering with emotion! Jealousy blackened the gardens to me.

"Who is that man?" I exclaimed.

"I don't know," she faltered.

"You don't know? But you are trembling?"

"Am I?"

"I ask you who he is? How he dared to look at you like that?"

"Am I responsible for the way a loafer looks?"

"You are responsible for your agitation; I ask you to explain it!"

"And by what right, after all?"

"By what right? Wretched, false-hearted girl! Has our communion for hours given me no rights? Am I a Frenchman or a flounder? Answer; you are condemning me to tortures! Why did you tremble under that man's eyes?"

"I was afraid," she stammered.

"Afraid?"

"Afraid that he had recognised me."

"Mon Dieu! Of what are you guilty?"

"I am not guilty."

"Of what are you accused?"

"I can tell you nothing," she gasped.

"You shall tell me all!" I swore. "In the name of my love I demand it of you. Speak! Why did you fear his recognition?"

Her head drooped pitifully.

"Because I wanted *you* to recognise me first!"

For a tense moment I gazed at her bewildered. In the next, I cursed myself for a fool—I blushed for my suspicions, my obtuseness—I sought dizzily the words, the prescribed words that I must speak.

"Pardon," I shouted, "you are mademoiselle Girard!"

She sobbed.

"What have I done?"

"You have done a great and generous thing! I am humbled before you. I bless you. I don't know how I could have been such a dolt as not to guess!"

"Oh, how I wish you had guessed! You have been so kind to me, I longed for you to guess! And now I have betrayed a trust. I have been a bad journalist."

"You have been a good friend. Courage!

No one will ever hear what has happened. And, anyhow, it is all the same to the paper whether the prize is paid to me, or to somebody else."

"Yes," she admitted. "That is true. Oh, when that man turned round and looked at me, I thought your chance had gone! I made sure it was all over! Well"—she forced a smile—"it is no use my being sorry, is it? Mademoiselle Girard is 'found'!"

"But you must not be sorry," I said. "Come, a disagreeable job is finished! And you have the additional satisfaction of knowing the money goes to a fellow you don't altogether dislike. What do I have to do about it, hein?"

"You must telegraph to *La Voix* at once that you have identified me. Then, in the morning you should go to the office. I can depend upon you, can't I? You will never give me away to a living soul?"

"Word of honour!" I vowed. "What do you take me for? Do tell me you don't regret! There's a dear. Tell me you don't regret."

She threw back her head dauntlessly.

"No," she said, "I don't regret. Only, in justice to me, remember that I was treacherous in order to do a turn to you, not to escape my own discomforts. To be candid, I believe that I wish we had met in two or three weeks' time, instead of to-day!"

"Why that?"

"In two or three weeks' time the prize was to be raised to five thousand francs, to keep up the excitement."

"Ciel!" I cried. "Five thousand francs? Do you know that positively?"

"Oh, yes!" She nodded. "It is arranged."

Five thousand francs would have been a fortune to me.

Neither of us spoke for some seconds. Then, continuing my thoughts aloud, I said:

"After all, why should I telegraph at once? What is to prevent my waiting the two or three weeks?"

"Oh, to allow you to do that would be scandalous of me," she demurred; "I should be actually swindling *La Voix*."

"*La Voix* will obtain a magnificent advertisement for its outlay, which is all that it desires," I argued; "the boom will be worth five thousand francs to *La Voix*, there is no question of swindling. Five thousand francs is a sum with which one might——"

"It can't be done," she persisted.

"To a man in my position," I said, "five thousand francs——"

"It is impossible for another reason! As I told you, I am at the end of my resources. I rose this morning, praying that I should be identified. My landlady has turned me out, and I have no more than the price of one meal to go on with."

"You goose!" I laughed. "And if I were going to net five thousand francs by your tip three weeks hence, don't you suppose it would be good enough for me to pay your expenses in the meanwhile?"

She was silent again. I understood that her conscience was a more formidable drawback than her penury.

Monsieur, I said that you had asked me for a humiliating story—that I had poignant memories connected with *La Voix*. Here is one of them: I set myself to override her scruples—to render this girl false to her employers.

Many men might have done so without remorse. But not a man like me; I am naturally high-minded, of the most sensitive honour. Even when I conquered at last, I could not triumph. Far from it. I blamed the force of circumstances furiously for compelling me to sacrifice my principles to my purse. I am no adventurer, hein?

Enfin, the problem now was, where was I to hide her? Her portmanteau she had deposited at a railway station. Should we have it removed to another bedroom, or to a pension de famille? Both plans were open to objections—a bedroom would necessitate her still challenging discovery in restaurants; and at a pension de famille she would run risks on the premises. A pretty kettle of fish if someone spotted her while I was holding for the rise!

We debated the point exhaustively. And, having yielded, she displayed keen intelligence in arranging for the best. Finally she declared:

"Of the two things, a pension de famille is to be preferred. Instal me there as your sister! Remember that people picture me a wanderer and alone; therefore, a lady who is introduced by her brother is in small danger of being recognised as mademoiselle Girard."

She was right, I perceived it. We found an excellent house, where I was unknown. I presented her as "mademoiselle Henriette Delafosse, my sister." And, to be on the safe side, I engaged a private sitting-room for her, explaining that she was somewhat neurasthenic.

Good! I waited breathless now for every edition of *La Voix*, thinking that her price might advance even sooner. But she closed at three thousand francs daily. Girard stood firm, but there was no upward tendency. Every afternoon I called on her. She talked about that conscience of hers again sometimes, and it did not prove quite so delightful as I had expected, when I paid a visit. Especially when I paid a bill as well.

Monsieur, my disposition is most liberal. But when I had been mulcted in the second bill, I confess that I became a trifle downcast. I had prepared myself to nourish the girl wholesomely, as befitted the circumstances, but I had said nothing of vin supérieur, and I noted that she had been asking for it as if it were cider in Normandy. The list of extras in those bills gave me the jumps, and the charges made for scented soap were nothing short of an outrage.

Well, there was but one more week to bear now, and during the week I allowed her to revel. This, though I was approaching embarrassments *re* the rent of my own attic!

How strange is life! Who shall foretell the future? I had wrestled with my self-respect, I had nursed an investment which promised stupendous profits were I capable of carrying my scheme to a callous conclusion. But could I do it? Did I claim the prize, which had already cost me so much? Monsieur, you are a man of the world, a judge of character: I ask you, did I claim the prize, or did I not?

He threw himself back in the chair, and toyed significantly with his empty glass.

I regarded him, his irresolute mouth, his receding chin, his unquenchable thirst for absinthe. I regarded him and I paid him no compliments. I said:

"You claimed the prize."

"You have made a bloomer," he answered. "I did not claim it. The prize was claimed by the wife of a piano-tuner, who had discovered mademoiselle Girard employed in the artificial flower department of the Printemps. I read the blood-curdling news at nine o'clock on a Friday evening; and at 9.15, when I hurled myself, panic-stricken, into the pension de famille, the impostor who had tricked me out of three weeks' board and lodging had already done a bolt. I have never had the joy of meeting her since."

## HOW TRICOTRIN SAW LONDON

ONE day Tricotrin had eighty francs, and he said to Pitou, who was no less prosperous, "Good-bye to follies, for we have arrived at an epoch in our careers! Do not let us waste our substance on trivial pleasures, or paying the landlord—let us make it a provision for our future!"

"I rejoice to hear you speak for once like a business-man," returned Pitou. "Do you recommend gilt-edged securities, or an investment in land?"

"I would suggest, rather, that we apply our riches to some educational purpose, such as travel," explained the poet, producing a railway company's handbill. "By this means we shall enlarge our minds, and somebody has pretended that 'knowledge is power'—it must have been the principal of a school. It is not for nothing that we have l'Entente Cordiale—you may now spend a Sunday in London at about the cost of one of Madeleine's hats."

"These London Sunday baits may be a plot of the English Government to exterminate us; I have read that none but English people can survive a Sunday in London."

"No, it is not that, for we are offered the choice of a town called 'Eastbourne.' Listen, they tell me that in London the price of cigarettes is so much lower than with us that, to a bold smuggler, the trip is a veritable economy. Matches too! Matches are so cheap in England that the practice of stealing them from café tables has not been introduced."

"Well, your synopsis will be considered, and reported on in due course," announced the composer, after a pause; "but at the moment of going to press we would rather buy a hat for Madeleine."

And as Madeleine also thought that this would be better for him, it was decided that Tricotrin should set forth alone.

His departure for a foreign country was a solemn event. A small party of the Montmartrois had marched with him to the station, and more than once, in view of their anxious faces, the young man acknowledged mentally that he was committed to a harebrained scheme.

"Heaven protect thee, my comrade!" faltered Pitou. "Is thy vocabulary safely in thy pocket? Remember that 'un bock' is 'glass of beer.'"

"Here is a small packet of chocolate," murmured Lajeunie, embracing him; "in England, nothing to eat can be obtained on Sunday, and chocolate is very sustaining."

"And listen!" shouted Sanquereau; "on no account take off thy hat to strangers, nor laugh in the streets; the first is 'mad' over there, and the second is 'immoral.' May le bon Dieu have thee in His keeping! We count the hours till thy return!"

Then the train sped out into the night, and the poet realised that home and friends were left behind.

He would have been less than a poet if, in the first few minutes, the pathos of the situation had not gripped him by the throat. Vague, elusive fancies stirred his brain; he remembered the franc that he owed at the Café du Bel Avenir, and wondered if madame would speak gently of him were he lost at sea. Tender memories of past loves dimmed his eyes, and he reflected how poignant it would be to perish before the papers would give him any obituary notices. Regarding his fellow passengers, he lamented that none of them was a beautiful girl, for it was an occasion on which woman's sympathy would have been sweet; indeed he proceeded to invent some of the things that they might have said to each other. Inwardly he was still resenting the faces of his travelling companions when the train reached Dieppe.

"It is material for my biography," he soliloquised, as he crept down the gangway. "'Few who saw the young man step firmly on to the good ship's deck conjectured the emotions that tore his heart; few recognised him to be Tricotrin, whose work was at that date practically unknown.'" But as a matter of fact he did arouse conjectures of a kind, for when the boat moved from the quay, he could not resist the opportunity to murmur, "My France, farewell!" with an appropriate gesture.

His repose during the night was fitful, and when Victoria was reached at last, he was conscious of some bodily fatigue. However, his mind was never slow to receive impressions, and at the sight of the scaffolding, he whipped out his note-book on the platform. He wrote, "The English are extraordinarily prompt of action. One day it was discerned that la gare Victoria was capable of improvement—no sooner was the fact detected than an army of contractors was feverishly enlarging it." Pleased that his journey was already yielding such good results, the poet lit a Caporal, and sauntered through the yard.

Though the sky promised a fine Sunday, his view of London at this early hour was not inspiriting. He loitered blankly, debating which way to wander. Presently the outlook brightened—he observed a very dainty pair of shoes and ankles coming through the station doors.

Fearing that the face might be unworthy of them, he did not venture to raise his gaze until the girl had nearly reached the gate, but when he took the risk, he was rewarded by the discovery that her features were as piquant as her feet.

She came towards him slowly, and now he remarked that she had a grudge against Fate; her pretty lips were compressed, her beautiful eyes gloomy with grievance, the fairness of her brow was darkened by a frown. "Well," mused Tricotrin, "though the object of my visit is educational, the exigencies of my situation clearly compel me to ask this young lady to direct me somewhere. Can I summon up enough English before she has passed?"

It was a trying moment, for already she was nearly abreast of him. Forgetful of Sanquereau's instructions, as well as of most of the phrases that had been committed to memory, the poet swept off his hat, and stammered, "Mees, I beg your pardon!"

She turned the aggrieved eyes to him inquiringly. Although she had paused, she made no answer. Was his accent so atrocious as all that? For a second they regarded each other dumbly, while a blush of embarrassment mantled the young man's cheeks. Then, with a little gesture of apology, the girl said in French—

"I do not speak English, monsieur."

"Oh, le bon Dieu be praised!" cried Tricotrin, for all the world as if he had been back on the boulevard Rochechouart. "I was dazed with travel, or I should have recognised you were a Frenchwoman. Did you, too, leave Paris last night, mademoiselle?"

"Ah, no," said the girl pensively. "I have been in London for months. I hoped to meet a friend who wrote that she would arrive this morning, but"—she sighed—"she has not come!"

"She will arrive to-night instead, no doubt; I should have no anxiety. You may be certain she will arrive to-night, and this contretemps will be forgotten."

She pouted. "I was looking forward so much to seeing her! To a stranger who cannot speak the language, London is as triste as a tomb. To-day, I was to have had a companion, and now——"

"Indeed, I sympathise with you," replied Tricotrin. "But is it really so—London is what you say? You alarm me. I am here absolutely alone. Where, then, shall I go this morning?"

"There are churches," she said, after some reflection.

"And besides?"

"W-e-ll, there are other churches."

"Of course, such things can be seen in Paris also," demurred Tricotrin. "It is not essential to go abroad to say one's prayers. If I may take the liberty of applying to you, in which direction would you recommend me to turn my steps? For example, where is Soho—is it too far for a walk?"

"No, monsieur, it is not very far—it is the quarter in which I lodge."

"And do you return there now?" he asked eagerly.

"What else is there for me to do? My friend has not come, and——"

"Mademoiselle," exclaimed the poet, "I entreat you to have mercy on a compatriot! Permit me, at least, to seek Soho in your company—do not, I implore you, leave me homeless and helpless in a strange land! I notice an eccentric vehicle which instinct whispers is an English 'hansom.' For years I have aspired to drive in an English hansom once. It is in your power to fulfil my dream with effulgence. Will you consent to instruct the acrobat who is performing with a whip, and to take a seat in the English hansom beside me?"

"Monsieur," responded the pretty girl graciously, "I shall be charmed;" and, romantic as the incident appears, the next minute they were driving along Victoria Street together.

"The good kind fairies have certainly taken me under their wings," declared Tricotrin, as he admired his companion's profile. "It was worth enduring the pangs of exile, to meet with such kindness as you have shown me."

"I am afraid you will speedily pronounce the fairies fickle," said she, "for our drive will soon be over, and you will find Soho no fairyland."

"How comes it that your place of residence is so unsuitable to you, mademoiselle?"

"I lodge in the neighbourhood of the coiffeur's where I am employed, monsieur—where I handle the tails and transformations. Our speciality is artificial eyelashes; the attachment is quite invisible—and the result absolutely ravishing! No," she added hurriedly, "I am not wearing a pair myself, these are quite natural, word of honour! But we undertake to impart to any eyes the gaze soulful, or the twinkle coquettish, as the customer desires—as an artist, I assure you that these expressions are due, less to the eyes themselves than to the shade, and especially the curve, of the lashes. Many a woman has entered our saloon entirely insignificant, and turned the heads of all the men in the street when she left."

"You interest me profoundly," said Tricotrin. "At the same time, I shall never know in future whether I am inspired by a woman's eyes, or the skill of her coiffeur. I say 'in future.' I entertain no doubt as to the source of my sensations now."

She rewarded him for this by a glance that dizzied him, and soon afterwards the hansom came to a standstill amid an overpowering odour of cheese.

"We have arrived!" she proclaimed; "so it is now that we part, monsieur. For me there is the little lodging—for you the enormous London. It is Soho—wander where you will! There are restaurants hereabouts where one may find coffee and rolls at a modest price. Accept my thanks for your escort, and let us say bonjour."

"Are the restaurants so unsavoury that you decline to honour them?" he questioned.

"*Comment?*"

"Will you not bear me company? Or, better still, will you not let me command a coffee-pot for two to be sent to your apartment, and invite me to rest after my voyage?"

She hesitated. "My apartment is very humble," she said, "and—well, I have never done a thing like that! It would not be correct. What would you think of me if I consented?"

"I will think all that you would have me think," vowed Tricotrin. "Come, take pity on me! Ask me in, and afterwards we will admire the sights of London together. Where can the coffee-pot be ordered?"

"As for that," she said, "there is no necessity—I have a little breakfast for two already prepared. Enfin, it is understood—we are to be good comrades, and nothing more? Will you give yourself the trouble of entering, monsieur?"

The bedroom to which they mounted was shabby, but far from unattractive. The mantelshelf was brightened with flowers, a piano was squeezed into a corner, and Tricotrin had scarcely put aside his hat when he was greeted by the odour of coffee as excellent as was ever served in the Café de la Régence.

"If this is London," he cried, "I have no fault to find with it! I own it is abominably selfish of me, but I cannot bring myself to regret that your friend failed to arrive this morning; indeed, I shudder to think what would have become of me if we had not met. Will you mention the name that is to figure in my benisons?"

"My name is Rosalie Durand, monsieur."

"And mine is Gustave Tricotrin, mademoiselle—always your slave. I do not doubt that in Paris, at this moment, there are men who picture me tramping the pavement, desolate. Not one of them but would envy me from his heart if he could see my situation!"

"It might have fallen out worse, I admit," said the girl. "My own day was at the point of being dull to tears—and here I am chattering as if I hadn't a grief in the world! Let me persuade you to take another croissant!"

"Fervently I wish that appearances were not deceptive!" said Tricotrin, who required little persuasion. "Is it indiscreet to inquire to what griefs you allude? Upon my word, your position appears a very pretty one! Where do those dainty shoes pinch you?"

"They are not easy on foreign soil, monsieur. When I reflect that you go back to-night, that to-morrow you will be again in Paris, I could gnash my teeth with jealousy."

"But, ma foi!" returned Tricotrin, "to a girl of brains, like yourself, Paris is always open. Are there no customers for eyelashes in France? Why condemn yourself to gnash with jealousy when there is a living to be earned at home?"

"There are several reasons," she said; "for one thing, I am an extravagant little hussy and haven't saved enough for a ticket."

"I have heard no reason yet! At the moment my pocket is nicely lined—you might return with me this evening."

"Are you mad by any chance?" she laughed.

"It seems to me the natural course."

"Well, I should not be free to go like that, even if I took your money. I am a business woman, you see, who does not sacrifice her interests to her sentiment. What is your own career, monsieur Tricotrin?"

"I am a poet. And when I am back in Paris

I shall write verse about you. It shall be an impression of London—the great city as it reveals itself to a stranger whose eyes are dazzled by the girl he loves."

"Forbidden ground!" she cried, admonishing him with a finger. "No dazzle!"

"I apologise," said Tricotrin; "you shall find me a poet of my word. Why, I declare," he exclaimed, glancing from the window, "it has begun to rain!"

"Well, fortunately, we have plenty of time; there is all day for our excursion and we can wait for the weather to improve. If you do not object to smoking while I sing, monsieur, I propose a little music to go on with."

And it turned out that this singular assistant of a hairdresser had a very sympathetic voice, and no contemptible répertoire. Although the sky had now broken its promise shamefully and the downpour continued, Tricotrin found nothing to complain of. By midday one would have said that they had been comrades for years. By luncheon both had ceased even to regard the rain. And before evening approached, they had confided to each other their histories from the day of their birth.

Ascertaining that the basement boasted a smudgy servant girl, who was to be dispatched for entrées and sauterne, Tricotrin drew up the menu of a magnificent dinner as the climax. It was conceded that at this repast he should be the host; and having placed him on oath behind a screen, Rosalie proceeded to make an elaborate toilette in honour of his entertainment.

Determined, as he had said, to prove himself a poet of his word, the young man remained behind the screen as motionless as a waxwork, but the temptation to peep was tremendous, and at the whispering of a silk petticoat he was unable to repress a groan.

" What ails you? " she demanded, the whispering suspended.

" I merely expire with impatience to meet you again."

" Monsieur, I am hastening to the trysting-place. And my costume will be suitable to the occasion, believe me! "

" In that case, if you are not quick, you will have to wear crape. However, proceed! I can suffer with the best of them. . . . Are you certain that I can be of no assistance? I feel selfish, idling here like this. Besides, since I am able to see——"

" See? " she screamed.

" ——see no reason why you should refuse my aid, my plight is worse still. What are you doing now? "

" My hair," she announced.

"Surely it would not be improper for me to view a head of hair?"

"Perhaps not, monsieur; but my head is on my shoulders—which makes a difference."

"Mademoiselle," sighed Tricotrin, "never have I known a young lady whose head was on her shoulders more tightly. May I crave one indulgence? My imprisonment would be less painful for a cigarette, and I cannot reach the matches—will you consent to pass them round the screen?"

"It is against the rules. But I will consent to throw them over the top. Catch! Why don't you say 'thank you'?"

"Because your unjust suspicion killed me; I now need nothing but immortelles, and at dinner I will compose my epitaph. If I am not mistaken, I already smell the soup on the stairs."

And the soup had scarcely entered when his guest presented herself. Paquin and the Fairy Godmother would have approved her gown; as to her coiffure, if her employer could have seen it, he would have wanted to put her in his window. Tricotrin gave her his arm with stupefaction. "Upon my word," he faltered, "you awe me. I am now overwhelmed with embarrassment that I had the temerity to tease you while you dressed. And what shall I say of the host who is churl enough to welcome you in such a shabby coat?"

The cork went pop, their tongues went nineteen to the dozen, and the time went so rapidly that a little clock on the chest of drawers became a positive killjoy.

"By all the laws of dramatic effect," remarked the poet, as they trifled with the almonds and raisins, "you will now divulge that the fashionable lady before me is no 'Rosalie Durand,' of a hairdresser's shop, but madame la comtesse de Thrilling Mystery. Every novel reader would be aware that at this stage you will demand some dangerous service of me, and that I shall forthwith risk my life and win your love."

"Bien sûr! That is how it ought to be," she agreed.

"Is it impossible?"

"That I can be a countess?"

"Well, we will waive the 'countess'; and for that matter I will not insist on risking my life; but what about the love?"

"Without the rest," she demurred, "the situation would be too commonplace. When I can tell you that I am a countess I will say also that I love you; to-night I am Rosalie Durand, a friend. By the way, now I come to think of it, I shall be all that you have seen in London!"

"Why, I declare, so you will!" exclaimed Tricotrin. "Really this is a nice thing! I come to England for the benefit of my education—and when it is almost time for me to return, I find that I have spent the whole of the day in a room."

"But you have, at least, had a unique experience in it?" she queried with a whimsical smile.

"Well, yes; my journey has certainly yielded an adventure that none of my acquaintances would credit! Do you laugh at me?"

"Far from it; by-and-by I may even spare a tear for you—if you do not spoil the day by being clumsy at the end."

"Ah, Rosalie," cried the susceptible poet, "how can I bear the parting? What is France without you? I am no longer a Frenchman—my true home is now England! My heart will hunger for it, my thoughts will stretch themselves to it across the sea; banished to Montmartre, I shall mourn daily for the white cliffs of Albion, for Soho, and for you!"

"I, too, shall remember," she murmured. "But perhaps one of these days you will come to England again?"

"If the fare could be paid with devotion, I would come every Sunday, but how can I hope to amass enough money? Such things do not happen twice. No, I will not deceive myself—this is our farewell. See!" He rose, and turned the little clock with its face to the wall. "When that clock strikes, I must go to catch my train—in the meanwhile we will ignore the march of time. Farewells, tears, regrets, let us forget that they exist—let us drink the last glass together gaily, mignonne!"

They pledged each other with brave smiles, hand in hand. And now their chatter became fast and furious, to drown the clock's impatient tick.

The clockwork wheezed and whirred.

"'Tis going to part us," shouted Tricotrin; "laugh, laugh, Beloved, so that we may not hear!"

"Kiss me," she cried; "while the hour sounds, you shall hold me in your arms!"

"Heaven," gasped the young man, as the too brief embrace concluded, "how I wish it had been striking midnight!"

The next moment came the separation. He descended the stairs; at the window she waved her hand to him. And in the darkness of an "English hansom" the poet covered his face and wept.

"From our hearts we rejoice to have thee safely back!" they chorused in Montmartre. "And what didst thou see in London?"

"Oh, mon Dieu, what noble sights!" exclaimed Tricotrin. "The Lor' Maire blazes with jewels like the Shah of Persia; and compared with Peeccadeelly, the Champs Elysées are no wider than a hatband. Vive l'Entente! Positively my brain whirls with all the splendours of London I have seen!"

# THE INFIDELITY OF MONSIEUR NOULENS

Whenever they talk of him, whom I will call "Noulens" — of his novels, his method, the eccentricities of his talent — someone is sure to say, "But what comrades, he and his wife!" —you are certain to hear it. And as often as I hear it myself, I think of what he told me that evening—I remember the shock I had.

At the beginning, I had expected little. When I went in, his wife said, "I fear he will be poor company; he has to write a short story for *La Voix*, and cannot find a theme—he has been beating his brains all day." So far from anticipating emotions, I had proposed dining there another night instead, but she would not allow me to leave. "Something you say may suggest a theme to him," she declared, "and he can write or dictate the story in an hour, when you have gone."

So I stayed, and after dinner he lay on the sofa, bewailing the fate that had made him an author. The salon communicated with his study, and through the open door he had the invitation of his writing-table—the little sheaf of paper that she had put in readiness for him, the lighted lamp, the pile of cigarettes. I knew that she hoped the view would stimulate him, but it was soon apparent that he had ceased to think of a story altogether. He spoke of one of the latest murders in Paris, one sensational enough for the Paris Press to report a murder prominently—of a conférence at the Université des Annales, of the artistry of Esther Lekain, of everything except his work. Then, in the hall, the telephone bell rang, and madame Noulens rose to receive the message. "Allô! Allô!"

She did not come back. There was a pause, and presently he murmured:

"I wonder if a stranger has been moved to telephone a plot to me?"

"What?" I said.

"It sounds mad, hein? But it once happened—on just such a night as this, when my mind was just as blank. Really! Out of the silence a woman told me a beautiful story. Of course, I never used it, nor do I know if she made use of it herself; but I have never forgotten. For years I could not hear a telephone bell without trembling. Even now, when I am working late, I find myself hoping for her voice."

"The story was so wonderful as that?"

He threw a glance into the study, as if to assure himself that his wife had not entered it from the hall.

"Can you believe that a man may learn to love—tenderly and truly love—a woman he has never met?" he asked me.

"I don't think I understand you."

"There has been only one woman in my life who was all in all to me," he said—"and I never saw her."

How was I to answer? I looked at him.

"After all, what is there incredible in it?" he demanded. "Do we give our love to a face, or to a temperament? I swear to you that I could not have known that woman's temperament more intimately if we had made our confidences in each other's arms. I knew everything of her, except the trifles which a stranger learns in the moment of being presented—her height, her complexion, her name, whether she was married or single. No, those things I never knew. But her tastes, her sympathies, her soul, these, the secret truths of the woman, were as familiar to me as to herself."

He hesitated.

"I am in a difficulty. If I seem to disparage my wife, I shall be a cad; if I let you think we have been as happy together as people imagine, you will not understand the importance of what I am going to tell you. I will say this: before our honeymoon was over, I bored her fearfully. While we were engaged, I had talked to her of my illusions about herself; when we were married, I talked to her of my convictions about my art. The change appalled her. She was chilled, crushed, dumfounded. I looked to her to share my interests. For response, she yawned—and wept.

"Oh, her tears! her hourly tears! the tears that drowned my love!

"The philosopher is made, not born; in the first few years I rebelled furiously. I wanted a companion, a confidant, and I had never felt so desperately alone.

"We had a flat in the rue de Sontay then, and the telephone was in my workroom. One night late, as I sat brooding there, the bell startled me; and a voice—a woman's voice, said:

"'I am so lonely; I want to talk to you before I sleep.'

"I cannot describe the strangeness of that appeal, reaching me so suddenly out of the distance. I knew that it was a mistake, of course, but it was as if, away in the city, some nameless soul had echoed the cry in my own heart. I obeyed an impulse; I said:

"'I, too, am very lonely—I believe I have been waiting for you.'

" There was a pause, and then she asked, dismayed :

" ' Who are you ? '

" ' Not the man you thought,' I told her. ' But a very wistful one.'

" I heard soft laughter. ' How absurd ! ' she murmured.

" ' Be merciful,' I went on ; ' we are both sad, and Fate clearly intends us to console each other. It cannot compromise you, for I do not even know who you are. Stay and talk to me for five minutes.'

" ' What do you ask me to talk about ? '

" ' Oh, the subject to interest us both—yourself.'

" After a moment she answered, ' I am shaking my head.'

" ' It is very unfeeling of you,' I said. ' And I have not even the compensation of seeing you do it.'

" Imagine another pause, and then her voice in my ear again :

" ' I will tell you what I can do for you—I can tell you a story.'

" ' The truth would please me more,' I owned. ' Still, if my choice must be made between your story and your silence, I certainly choose the story.'

" ' I applaud your taste,' she said. ' Are you comfortable—are you sitting down ? '

"I sat down, smiling. 'Madame——'

"She did not reply.

"Then, 'Mademoiselle——'

"Again no answer.

"'Well, say at least if I have your permission to smoke while I listen to you?'

"She laughed: 'You carry courtesy far!'

"'How far?' I asked quickly.

"But she would not even hint from what neighbourhood she was speaking to me. 'Attend!' she commanded—and began:

"'It is a story of two lovers,' she said, 'Paul and Rosamonde. They were to have married, but Rosamonde died too soon. When she was dying, she gave him a curl of the beautiful brown hair that he used to kiss. "Au revoir, dear love," she whispered; "it will be very stupid in Heaven until you come. Remember that I am waiting for you and be faithful. If your love for me fades, you will see that curl of mine fade too."

"'Every day through the winter Paul strewed flowers on her tomb, and sobbed. And in the spring he strewed flowers and sighed. And in the summer he paid that flowers might be strewn there for him. Sometimes, when he looked at the dead girl's hair, he thought that it was paler than it had been, but, as he looked at it seldom now, he could easily persuade himself that he was mistaken.

"'Then he met a woman who made him

happy again; and the wind chased the withered flowers from Rosamonde's grave and left it bare. One day Paul's wife found a little packet that lay forgotten in his desk. She opened it jealously, before he could prevent her. Paul feared that the sight would give her pain, and watched her with anxious eyes. But in a moment she was laughing. "What an idiot I am," she exclaimed—"I was afraid that it was the hair of some girl you had loved!" The curl was snow-white.'

"Her fantastic tale," continued Noulens, "which was told with an earnestness that I cannot reproduce, impressed me very much. I did not offer any criticism, I did not pay her any compliment; I said simply:

"'Who are you?'

"'That,' she warned me, 'is a question that you must not ask. Well, are you still bored?'

"'No.'

"'Interested, a little?'

"'Very much so.'

"'I, too, am feeling happier than I did. And now, bonsoir!'

"'Wait,' I begged. 'Tell me when I shall speak to you again.'

"She hesitated; and I assure you that I had never waited for a woman's answer with more suspense while I held her hand, than I waited for the answer of this woman whom I could not see. 'To-morrow?' I urged. 'In the morning?'

"'In the morning it would be difficult.'

"'The afternoon?'

"'In the afternoon it would be impossible.'

"'Then the evening—at the same hour?'

"'Perhaps,' she faltered—'if I am free.'

"'My number,' I told her, 'is five-four-two, one-nine. Can you write it now?'

"'I have written it.'

"'Please repeat, so that there may be no mistake.'

"'Five-four-two, one-nine. Correct?'

"'Correct. I am grateful.'

"'Good-night.'

"'Good-night. Sleep well.'

"You may suppose that on the morrow I remembered the incident with a smile, that I ridiculed the emotion it had roused in me? You would be wrong. I recalled it more and more curiously: I found myself looking forward to the appointment with an eagerness that was astonishing. We had talked for about twenty minutes, hidden from each other—half Paris, perhaps, dividing us; I had nothing more tangible to expect this evening. Yet I experienced all the sensations of a man who waits for an interview, for an embrace. What did it mean? I was bewildered. The possibility of love at first sight I understood; but might the spirit also recognise an affinity by telephone?

"There is a phrase in feuilletons that had always irritated me—'To his impatience it seemed that the clock had stopped.' It had always struck me as absurd. Since that evening I have never condemned the phrase, for honestly, I thought more than once that the clock had stopped. By-and-by, to increase the tension, my wife, who seldom entered my workroom, opened the door. She found me idle, and was moved to converse with me. Mon Dieu! Now that the hour approached at last, my wife was present, with the air of having settled herself for the night!

"The hands of the clock moved on—and always faster now. If she remained till the bell rang, what was I to do? To answer that I had 'someone with me' would be intelligible to the lady, but it would sound suspicious to my wife. To answer that I was 'busy' would sound innocent to my wife, but it would be insulting to the lady. To disregard the bell altogether would be to let my wife go to the telephone herself! I tell you I perspired.

"Under Providence, our cook rescued me. There came a timid knock, and then the figure of the cook, her eyes inflamed, her head swathed in some extraordinary garment. She had a raging toothache—would madame have the kindness to give her a little cognac? The ailments of the cook always arouse in human nature more solicitude than the ailments of any other servant. My wife's sympathy was active—I was saved!

"The door had scarcely closed when *tr-rr-r-ng* the signal came.

"'Good-evening,' from the voice. 'So you are here to meet me.'

"'Good-evening,' I said. 'I would willingly go further to meet you.'

"'Be thankful that the rendez-vous was your flat—listen to the rain! Come, own that you congratulated yourself when it began! "Luckily I can be gallant without getting wet," you thought. Really, I am most considerate—you keep a dry skin, you waste no time in reaching me, and you need not even trouble to change your coat.'

"'It sounds very cosy,' I admitted, 'but there is one drawback to it all—I do not see you.'

"'That may be more considerate of me still! I may be reluctant to banish your illusions. Isn't it probable that I am elderly—or, at least plain? I may even be a lady novelist, with ink on her fingers. By-the-bye, monsieur, I have been re-reading one of your books since last night.'

"'Oh, you know my name now? I am gratified to have become more than a telephonic address to you. May I ask if we have ever met?'

"'We never spoke till last night, but I have seen you often.'

"'You, at any rate, can have no illusions to be banished. What a relief! I have endeavoured to talk as if I had a romantic bearing; now that you know how I look, I can be myself.'

"'I await your next words with terror,' she said. 'What shock is in store for me? Speak gently.'

"'Well, speaking gently, I am very glad that you were put on to the wrong number last night. At the same time, I feel a constraint, a difficulty; I cannot talk to you frankly, cannot be serious—it is as if I showed my face while you were masked.'

"'Yes, it is true—I understand,' she said. 'And even if I were to swear that I was not unworthy of your frankness, you would still be doubtful of me, I suppose?'

"'Madame——'

"'Oh, it is natural! I know very well how I must appear to you,' she exclaimed; 'a coquette, with a new pastime—a vulgar coquette, besides, who tries to pique your interest by an air of mystery. Believe me, monsieur, I am forbidden to unmask. Think lightly of me if you must—I have no right to complain—but believe as much as that! I do not give you my name, simply because I may not.'

" 'Madame,' I replied, 'so far from wishing to force your confidences, I assure you that I will never inquire who you are, never try to find out.'

" 'And you will talk frankly, unconstrainedly, all the same?'

" 'Ah, you are too illogical to be elderly and plain,' I demurred. 'You resolve to remain a stranger to me, and I bow to your decision; but, on the other hand, a man makes confidences only to his friends.'

" There was a long pause; and when I heard the voice again, it trembled:

" 'Adieu, monsieur.'

" 'Adieu, madame,' I said.

" No sooner had she gone than I would have given almost anything to bring her back. For a long while I sat praying that she would ring again. I watched the telephone as if it had been her window, the door of her home—something that could yield her to my view. During the next few days I grudged every minute that I was absent from the room.—I took my meals in it.

Never had I had the air of working so indefatigably, and in truth I did not write a line. 'I suppose you have begun a new romance?' said my wife. In my soul I feared that I had finished it!"

Noulens sighed; he clasped his hands on his head. The dark hair, the thin, restless fingers were all that I could see of him where I sat. Some seconds passed; I wondered whether there would be time for me to hear the rest before his wife returned.

"In my soul I feared that I had finished it," he repeated. "Extraordinary as it appears, I was in love with a woman I had never seen. Each time that bell sounded, my heart seemed to try to choke me. It had been my grievance, since we had the telephone installed, that we heard nothing of it excepting that we had to make another payment for its use; but now, by a maddening coincidence, everybody that I had ever met took to ringing me up about trifles and agitating me twenty times a day.

"At last, one night—when expectation was almost dead—she called to me again. Oh, but her voice was humble! My friend, it is piteous when we love a woman, to hear her humbled. I longed to take her hands, to fold my arms about her. I abased myself, that she might regain her pride. She heard how I had missed and sorrowed for her; I owned that she was dear to me.

"And then began a companionship—strange as you may find the word—which was the sweetest my life has held. We talked together daily. This woman, whose whereabouts, whose face, whose name were all unknown to me, became the confidant of my disappointments and my hopes. If I worked well, my thought would be, 'To-night I shall have good news to give her;' if I worked ill—'Never mind, by-and-by she will encourage me!' There was not a page in my next novel that I did not read to her; never a doubt beset me in which I did not turn for her sympathy and advice.

"'Well, how have you got on?'

"'Oh, I am so troubled this evening, dear!'

"'Poor fellow! Tell me all about it. I tried to come to you sooner, but I couldn't get away.'

"Like that! We talked as if she were really with me. My life was no longer desolate—the indifference in my home no longer grieved me. All the interest, the love, the inspiration I had hungered for, was given to me now by a woman who remained invisible."

Noulens paused again. In the pause I got up to light a cigarette, and—I shall never forget it—I saw the bowed figure of his wife beyond the study door! It was only a glimpse I had, but the glimpse was enough to make my heart stand still—she leant over the table, her face hidden by her hand.

I tried to warn, to signal to him—he did not see me. I felt that I could do nothing, nothing at all, without doubling her humiliation by the knowledge that I had witnessed it. If he would only look at me!

"Listen," he went on rapidly. "I was happy, I was young again—and there was a night when she said to me, 'It is for the last time.'

"Six words! But for a moment I had no breath, no life, to answer them.

"'Speak!' she cried out. 'You are frightening me!'

"'What has happened?' I stammered. 'Trust me, I implore you!'

"I heard her sobbing—and minutes seemed to pass. It was horrible. I thought my heart would burst while I shuddered at her sobs—the sobbing of a woman I could not reach.

"'I can tell you nothing,' she said, when she was calmer; 'only that we are speaking together for the last time.'

"'But why—why? Is it that you are leaving France?'

" 'I cannot tell you,' she repeated. 'I have had to swear that to myself.'

" Oh, I raved to her! I was desperate. I tried to wring her name from her then—I besought her to confess where she was hidden. The space between us frenzied me. It was frightful, it was like a nightmare, that struggle to tear the truth from a woman whom I could not clasp or see.

" 'My dear,' she said, 'there are some things that are beyond human power. They are not merely difficult, or unwise, or mad—they are impossible. *You* have begged the impossible of *me*. You will never hear me again, it is far from likely we shall ever meet—and if one day we do, you will not even know that it is I. But I love you. I should like to think that you believe it, for I love you very dearly. Now say good-bye to me. My arms are round your neck, dear heart—I kiss you on the lips.'

" It was the end. She was lost. A moment before, I had felt her presence in my senses; now I stood in an empty room, mocked by a futile apparatus. My friend, if you have ever yearned to see a woman whose whereabouts you did not know—ever exhausted yourself tramping some district in the hope of finding her—you may realise what I feel; for remember that by comparison your task was easy—I am even ignorant of this woman's arrondissement and appearance. She left me helpless. The telephone had given her—the telephone had taken her away. All that remained to me was the mechanism on a table."

Noulens turned on the couch at last—and, turning, he could not fail to see his wife. I was spellbound.

"'Mechanism on a table,' he repeated, with a prodigious yawn of relief. 'That is all, my own.'"

"Good!" said madame Noulens cheerily. She bustled in, fluttering pages of shorthand. "But, old angel, the tale of Paul and Rosamonde is thrown away—it is an extravagance, telling two stories for the price of one!"

"My treasure, thou knowest I invented it months ago and couldn't make it long enough for it to be of any use."

"True. Well, we will be liberal, then—we will include it." She noticed my amazement. "What ails our friend?"

Noulens gave a guffaw. "I fear our friend did not recognise that I was dictating to you. By-the-bye, it was fortunate someone rang us up just now—that started my plot for me! Who was it?"

"It was *La Voix*," she laughed, "inquiring if the story would be done in time!"

Yes, indeed, they are comrades!—you are certain to hear it. And as often as I hear it myself, I think of what he told me that evening—I remember how he took me in.

THE END

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